

# Think Tank Networks in Mexico: How They Shape Public Policy and Dominant Discourses

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Although think tanks have spread throughout the Global North since the beginning of the twentieth century, they are a relatively new phenomenon in Mexico. Since the 1990s, however, they have proliferated rapidly, building networks that now play a key role in coordinating elites in the country in order to influence public policies and strategies. Particular policies that have been promoted over the past three decades include those associated with the retreat of the state from the economy, privatization and other neoliberal reforms, NAFTA and the set of new rules this agreement has entailed. Policy experts affiliated with these think tanks have become increasingly visible in the news media, and have drawn together closely intertwined policy groups that decide on the standards required to create and legitimize policy knowledge in different areas.

Despite the greater visibility of these organizations and policy experts in the news media, as well as in the most relevant public discussions, along with their influence on planning the economic and

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political reforms of the last three decades and the growing literature on think tanks in both the Global North (Abelson 2000; McGann 2007; Medvetz 2012; Rich 2004, 2011; Stone and Denham 2004) and Latin America (Fisher and Plehwe, in this volume; Mendizabal and Sample 2009), little academic work has been undertaken on Mexican think tanks. This chapter seeks to fill this void by analyzing their most important characteristics: who controls them; the networks they have constructed over the past 25 years; the strategies they pursue to influence policy-making; the most influential ideological orientations; and the extent to which the Mexican think tank network is linked to regional or international networks. I argue that the landscape of Mexican organizations undertaking policy research has undergone a profound transformation over the past three decades, partly due to a political economy increasingly centred in the market. Furthermore, these organizations have become particularly visible during public debates aimed at accelerating and legitimizing the neoliberal reforms of the past 25 years. However, as these reforms have increased poverty, the concentration of wealth, insecurity and other problems, alternative policy ideas and think tanks have appeared.

### ADAPTING THE CONCEPT OF THINK TANKS

When the concept of the think tank is translated into other languages, several angles of the conceptual discussion are missed.<sup>1</sup> Although their role in producing, disseminating and shaping policy agendas is generally acknowledged, their part in structuring relations of power is usually ignored. The ambivalence of these organizations, already highlighted in the Introduction, makes a clear-cut definition difficult to achieve. Several scholars (Burris 2008; Campbell and Pedersen 2011; Carroll 2013) have consequently opted for the concept of ‘policy making organizations’, which makes a comparative analysis feasible and does not take for granted the independent character of think tanks claimed, among others, by McGann (2007) and Rich (2004, p. 11). On the contrary, it makes this independence an object of inquiry (Medvetz 2012) or variability (Campbell and Pedersen 2011), depending on the knowledge regime and fields of power across time and countries.

According to Campbell and Pedersen (2011), the level of independence of think tanks is determined by the political economy of each country—that is, on the way the relationships between economics and politics

are structured—which in turn shapes the knowledge regime, made up of the set of institutions and organizations producing public policy knowledge. In contrast, Medvetz (2012) contends that the level of independence (autonomy versus heteronomy) of think tanks varies over time as the experts (and the think tanks with which they are affiliated) struggle to control the process of knowledge production. In this way, he argues, think tanks create a field of power that is very dynamic as they try to define the rules that certify and legitimize knowledge, constructing on the basis of this knowledge a dominant policy discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Following on from the Introduction, this chapter underscores the essential connection between think tanks and power. It argues that the key role played by think tanks in knowledge production, concentration and mobilization makes them an ideal mechanism to structure relations of power, challenge or validate dominant policy discourses, and constitute the rules of a Mexican knowledge regime and field of power. Their sources of authority and legitimacy depend on the quality of their research and the capacity to communicate the results and persuade an informed public. They persuade policy-makers directly through lobbying strategies and indirectly through the media and active participation in the most important policy debates.

In this light, the following additional questions are addressed: First, how do Mexican think tanks constitute a knowledge regime and a field of power? Second, what are the main changes experienced by these think tanks as the political economy increasingly becomes centred in the market? And third, how is the field of think tanks constructed to wield power in the process of policy-making?

I argue that neoliberal strategies implemented in Mexico from the 1980s have rolled back the frontiers of the state from many different economic and social spheres, and made it more decentralized and open to pressures from different interest groups. Several consequences follow. First, planning research, monitoring and evaluation tasks that formerly were undertaken in-house by the state are increasingly being outsourced to think tanks and other private research centres, opening many points of access and pressure in both the executive and legislative apparatus. Second, as the number of think tanks grows more rapidly, the knowledge regime becomes increasingly confrontational, partisan and competitive, following trends similar to those seen in the USA. Hence, the field of think tanks becomes more powerful within the national structure of power as the organizations involved in the field weave an increasingly

dense network, and as the production and legitimation of policy knowledge and policy discourse are controlled by a smaller group of experts (policy wonks and hacks), political intermediaries and large corporate leaders who have become key links connecting the most influential elites in the region. Both think tanks and experts influence policy-making in several ways, notably the concentration of knowledge and information, as well as the means to process and monitor data; executive and legislative lobbying; and an overwhelming presence in the media to define the agenda, and construct and disseminate an ideological and political discourse—especially one that responds to the most pressing issues for regional elites. All these tasks are carried out via a complex mix of research, analysis, monitoring, advising, lobbying, persuasion, deliberation and advocacy, although the emphasis changes over time and across specific think tanks.

### STRUCTURE OF THE CHAPTER AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter is structured around three questions, which will be addressed in different sections: What are the main characteristics and types of Mexican think tanks? Who controls them? And what are the main mechanisms they use to shape public policies, dominant discourses and economic reforms?

The research strategy followed several steps to examine Mexican think tanks and how they constitute a knowledge regime and a field of power. First, a sample was assembled that included the majority of the Mexican think tanks in McGann's (2014) list, but other think tanks not included in this list were added because they are equally important in terms of the research they undertake and their influence in the most relevant policy debates. In this way, I have tried to ensure that the most representative think tanks of the types put forward in the following section have been included. That said, it must also be noted that the list is not exhaustive, many NGOs that carry out research on public policies were not considered mainly because activism, rather than research, is their main focus of attention, as in the case of the Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights (Liga Mexicana por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos), Mexican Transparency (Transparencia Mexicana), Equipo Pueblo and the Mexican Network of Action Facing Free Trade (Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio), among many others.

Second, a database was constructed that included all the directors of the boards of these think tanks, all the experts affiliated with these organizations and, in the case of more academic think tanks, the most outstanding researchers or fellows, because it is they who often effect the connections since they are frequently invited to sit on the boards of independent think tanks, participate in the media and decide the lines of research. All of these actors cooperate to decide the strategies and generate interlocks among themselves and with other interests.

Third, formal network analysis was carried out in order to examine the patterns of connections and groupings between think tanks, their centrality and the tensions or divisions emerging from the ideologies they espouse, or from the technocratic knowledge produced. The pattern of connections and grouping between these think tanks was discovered with the help of two network analysis programs, UCINET and PAJEK, which can measure the centrality of think tanks, directors and experts, the intensity of connections, the formation of groups and the extent to which these groups correspond to groups with similar ideological or political orientations. The network of interests is in itself the most important mechanism of coordination, cohesion and control, but other mechanisms will be considered. The information comes from the think tanks' websites, biographies of directors, experts and academics, as well as hemerographic and other secondary sources.

## TYPES OF MEXICAN THINK TANKS

Considering several criteria, but in particular affiliation and the origin of funding, six types of Mexican think tanks have been identified: those affiliated with academic institutions, business associations, state agencies, parties, consultancy firms and non-affiliated or independent think tanks. All of them undertake research in different ways and try to influence the process of policy-making following different strategies. Of the 56 think tanks in our sample, 20 (almost 37%) are independent think tanks, 11 (almost 20%) are academic, eight (more than 14%) are think tanks affiliated with business associations, six are consulting firms that undertake public policy research and compete to influence policy-makers, six are think tanks affiliated with national or international parties and five are think tanks affiliated with state agencies (see Table 2.1).

As Medvetz (2012) points out, the line dividing these think tank types is not clear-cut, as they share some common traits and tend to

**Table 2.1** Mexican think tanks

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Presence in the media</i>	<i>Lobbying activities</i>	<i>Created</i>
Total	56	100.0	40	30	–
Independent	20	35.7	12	8	1984–2013 <sup>a</sup>
Academic	11	19.6	9	7	1930–1974
Business associations	8	14.3	8	8	1917–1999
Consulting firms	6	10.7	3	2	1990–present
Parties	6	10.7	4	4	–
State agencies	5	8.9	4	3	1925–1986

<sup>a</sup>Except FMDR, which was founded in 1963

converge in certain practices. Thus consulting firms, independent think tanks and often academic think tanks undertake research on a contract basis, which consequently responds to specific public or private interests. Advocacy and activism through a more intense use of the media and participation in different events also cut across several categories—whether independent or affiliated think tanks (business, academic or partisan institutions)—as they try to sway preferences and public opinion in favour of specific public policies. Out of the 56 think tanks in our sample, at least 40 are present in the media, either wielding institutional positions or represented by affiliated experts.

Table 2.1 shows that, until the 1980s, planning, research and evaluation of public policies were concentrated in think tanks affiliated with academic institutions, business associations (such as CEESP),<sup>3</sup> political parties (IEPES) or public think tanks, following trends similar to those in France, although with predominantly corporatist forms of economic coordination, as in Germany (see Campbell and Pedersen 2011 and the Introduction). From that point onwards, new trends converge, overlap and together reinforce a reconfiguration of the landscape of think tanks that increasingly privatizes public policy research. Among these trends, several are particularly outstanding:

- There has been a proliferation of independent think tanks and consulting firms undertaking public policy research and lobbying, and gaining a multifarious and visible presence in the media and multiple public debates.

- The profile of independent and academic think tanks and experts (especially those affiliated with ITAM and CIDE) has become more activist and adversarial, producing knowledge, not for its own sake (i.e. scientific or basic knowledge) but aligned to specific interests and preferences—that is practical or applied knowledge (Bleiklie and Byrkjeflot 2002; Nowotny et al. 2003).
- There has been a disappearance or waning of public research centres formerly affiliated with ministries or other state agencies, which tend to outsource research needs to independent think tanks, academic institutions or consulting firms.
- Public research has been concentrated in the so-called autonomous agencies, such as Banco de México, INEGI, la CNBV and Coneval—all of which offer statistics and analysis in their specific areas of knowledge.
- New and more complex forms of cooperation and collaboration have emerged between think tanks affiliated with business associations, academic institutions and consultancy firms.
- Former business research centres have not disappeared, but have tended to incorporate more sophisticated analytical methods to evaluate public policies and lobby not only the executive but increasingly also the legislative apparatus, as the latter becomes more relevant in the definition of public policies.
- Think tanks have emerged with alternative policy ideas and proposals that stress social and economic justice, transparency, security and collective rights.

Out of 17 independent think tanks with information available, at least 11 were founded after 2000, two were founded in the 1990s, three in the 1980s and only one before that time. Most of these think tanks are very active in the media, and often they devote special teams and resources to organizing and participating in the most relevant discussions. In some cases, this type of think tank receives a mix of public and private funds—for example, ETHOS, INSYDE, COMEXI and IMCO; in other cases, they only receive private funds, either from corporations or foundations (CIDAC, IPEA, CASEDE and CEEY). Among the latter, you can find contributions from Hewlett-Packard, MacArthur, Open Society, Kellogg's and Ford. Six of the independent think tanks carry out very diversified research, covering economic, political and social issues (FUNDAR), while eight tend to focus on specific problems, such

as security (INSYDE), human rights (CASEDE), rural development (FMDR), women and gender (GIRE), training (CIEP), foreign policy (COMEXI) and competitiveness (IMCO), although within these areas they may expand to other issues affecting their area of interest (IMCO, for example, covers a wide range of problems affecting competitiveness, such as transparency, education and public spending). Other differences among independent think tanks relate to their philosophical orientation and whether or not they carry out lobbying. At least eight independent think tanks are very active in lobbying legislative agencies to promote (or block) reforms, depending on their preferences. However, of all the characteristics of independent think tanks, it is the philosophical orientation that weighs more strongly on the structure of the network, as will be seen later.

Some of the Mexican independent think tanks have received acknowledgements by the Think Tanks and Global Society program led by McGann at the University of Pennsylvania. Of the 20 independent think tanks in our sample, 13 are included among the most important in McGann's 2014 list. Special mentions have been granted to the following think tanks:

- FUNDAR—whose agenda focuses on policies affecting equality, access to justice and transparency, among others—has been mentioned ten times by the peers interviewed by the programmes as, among other things, one of the Top Transparency and Good Governance Think Tanks, one of the Best Institutional Collaboration Involving Two or More Think Tanks, Best Managed Think Tanks, Best Use of Social Networks and Think Tank with Outstanding Policy-Oriented Public Programs.
- CIDAC—with an agenda focusing on individual liberties, free market and liberalizing policies—obtained nine mentions in McGann lists, in particular Best Institutional Collaboration Involving Two or More Think Tanks, Best Managed Think Tanks, Best New Idea or Paradigm Developed, Best Policy Study/Report Produced and Best Think Tank to Watch.
- ETHOS—with a strong liberal orientation—was mentioned as achieving Best Advocacy Campaign, Best Use of Social Networks, Best Think Tank to Watch and Think Tank with the Best Use of Internet. McGann's lists have become references that the think tanks openly brandish as providing evidence of the good quality

of their research. Moreover, sponsors evaluating and qualifying the performance of the think tanks they support also use these rankings.

Some think tanks working strictly under contract (mostly consulting firms) were included in our sample (McGann does not include this type of think tank) because, even if they are private firms, they produce knowledge on public policies and try to influence policy-making processes. Although the number of these think tanks has increased and diversified enormously in the past few years, only six were included in the sample because they were founded by ex-public officials who played a key role in the introduction of neoliberal reforms and have become very conspicuous in the most relevant public debates. Experts affiliated with these firms appear frequently in the media, and they offer very specialized information and analytical services to public and private clients, profiting from the political capital accumulated throughout their careers in the state apparatus, and often from privileged information too. Several cases evidence how these consulting firms have become research centres—most notably, the group GEA-ISA, created by Jesús Reyes Heróles, and Protego-Evercore, created by Pedro Aspe. Protego-Evercore, offers financial advice to different state agencies at different levels of the administration. Jesús Reyes Heróles not only advises large oil corporations, notwithstanding his high-profile positions as director of Pemex (2006–2009), Secretary of Energy (1995–1997) and Mexican Ambassador to the United States (1997–2000). He also participated actively in the debates of 2013 leading to the energy reforms. Other influential consulting firms that undertake research on public policies are SAI, created by Jaime Serra Puche, Secretary of Commerce under the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and IQOM, presided over by Herminio Blanco, Secretary of Commerce under Ernesto Zedillo. These two former state officials played an outstanding role in the negotiations and administration of NAFTA, and they now offer advice on international trade disputes, international agreements, strategic planning and corporate legal issues. IQOM, in particular, counsels several governments, international organizations, corporations and business associations on issues related to foreign investment and international trade.

As has previously been mentioned, the number of state centres generating information, knowledge and research has diminished considerably since the 1980s. Some of them have disappeared,<sup>4</sup> while others have

reduced their research activities considerably, particularly the Instituto Mexicano del Petróleo (affiliated with Pemex). Those state centres that are still undertaking research activities have become formally and sometimes legally autonomous. At least three of them (INEGI, Banxico and Coneval) have experienced constitutional reforms that grant them legal autonomy, although in some cases the degree of independence from the acting president is still dubious. This problem is especially acute in the case of INEGI, whose information on employment and unemployment is often questionable. In addition, the reforms to this institute have not modified the faculty of the president to appoint the members of the board (see Ackerman 2008; Leal 2008). The central bank, Banxico, also works as an autonomous entity, offering statistics and analysis on the economic performance and forecasts, in addition to its role in defining monetary policies and managing interest and exchange rates. Except for Coneval, which specializes in poverty and social policies in general, and to a lesser degree INEGI, which offers a wide array of indicators and statistical information and forecasts on demography, unemployment and geographic distribution of economic activities, among other things, the remaining state think tanks openly endorse pro-market and liberalizing policies, both on the national and international fronts.

Although most academic think tanks undertaking research on public policies were created in the first half of the twentieth century, they have undergone a profound transformation, especially regarding an increasingly more conspicuous presence in the media, and at public discussions where experts compete to get the attention of politicians and the general public. This dynamics was quite noticeable in the events organized throughout 2013 and 2014 around the privatization of the energy sector. During these events, experts from different academic institutions confronted policy recommendations more or less aligned with a free market, anti-state ideology.

Almost all the academic think tanks in our sample are active in the media (see Table 2.1), and experts affiliated with these think tanks are not only invited to participate in media discussions but often preside over influential TV programmes and regularly write columns in the most prominent newspapers. Furthermore, as will be seen later, they effect a great number of links among themselves, with independent think tanks, consulting firms, regional and global think tanks playing an increasingly prominent role in the coordination of the think tank network, and consequently in the construction of the dominant policy discourse and the

definition of the rules designed to certify and legitimize public policy knowledge. Most of them have different kinds of connections with the legislative apparatus in order to lobby and disseminate their philosophical and policy preferences, as well as analytical results around financial policy, employment, human rights, elections, property rights and many other issues. They shape policy-making through these and other mechanisms. Experts from CIDE have become particularly active in the media, and since the 1990s the institution has deliberately planned strategies to expand its presence in key media programmes—especially those exerting greater influence on public opinion. But other private academic think tanks (such as UI, ITAM and CEDAN) are following the same course of action.

Apart from think tanks affiliated with business associations, which will be examined in more detail in another section, a brief mention should be made of think tanks affiliated with political parties. The three most relevant Mexican parties—PAN, PRI and PRD—have created their own think tanks: Fundación Rafael Preciado, Colosio-ICADEP and INIFCPPPG, respectively. These centres do not just undertake research on public policies; they also educate and tutor political cadres, offering training and educational activities. In addition, two international foundations affiliated with German parties—Ebert and Konrad Adenauer, affiliated with the Social Democratic and the Christian Democratic Party respectively—have a representative organization in Mexico that carries out some public policy research and supports projects undertaken by academic or independent think tanks.

Cooperation and collaboration between think tanks affiliated with business associations, academic institutions and consultancy firms become increasingly common, reinforcing in different ways the process of knowledge production, dissemination and assimilation. Thus, IMEF has been sponsored not only by academic institutions (such as ITAM, UI, Tecnológico de Monterrey and IPADE), but also by prestigious national and international consultancy firms specializing in financial issues. Similarly, the independent think tank México Cómo Vamos is governed by a panel of experts, including those of several academic institutions like ITAM (seven experts in the board), UNAM (four experts) and Harvard (one), in addition to the participation of experts from other independent think tanks such as IMCO, México Evalúa, CIDAC and CEEY). A total of 40 experts, according to its website, cooperate to bridge academic knowledge and public debate.

Nonetheless, cooperation between different types of think tanks can best be illustrated by the joint efforts undertaken during 2015 and 2016 to push forward anti-corruption legislation and to encourage more open parliamentary practices. These efforts have intertwined independent think tanks (particularly IMCO, FUNDAR and México Cómo Vamos), academic think tanks (CIDE and ITAM), as well as several NGOs (among others, Transparencia Mexicana and Arena Ciudadana). A group of 12 organizations coordinating multiple activities and discussions to enhance political participation, promote transparency and create an Alliance for an Open Parliament (Berain 2015).

Cooperation is increasingly transcending national borders, as in the case of COMEXI, a Mexican think tank specialized in foreign policy, which actively participated with think tanks from many other countries to create Think 20. This global think tank network pulls together think tanks from several G20 countries that meet regularly to harmonize foreign policies and, according to Stone (2015, p. 11), ‘its major achievement has been to cultivate a consensus within national policy research communities of the contemporary need for global coordination on economic and financial management’. In this way, cooperation not only entails legitimation and consensus building but also subtle mechanisms of control, as shown in the next section.

The trends analyzed in this section can be interpreted in the context of the economic and political reforms experienced by the country, which rolled back most of the research formerly carried out in-house by the state and developmentalist technocrats. Thus, the production of information, knowledge and policy ideas for different purposes is outsourced to specialized think tanks, academic institutions or consulting firms. Another factor shedding light on these trends is the political reforms empowering legislators, and making them the object of lobbying and political pressure. Although the number of academic research centres is not growing, they remain very important in the field of think tanks, not only because they are a source of authority and legitimacy but also because they feed independent think tanks’ research teams.

### WHO CONTROLS MEXICAN THINK TANKS?

This section explores who controls Mexican think tanks, both through the boards of directors and through the network of connections generated by these and other governing and research bodies. This

network—analyzed with the help of two software programs, UCINET VI and PAJEK 2.0—entails and furthers subtle and complex mechanisms of coordination and governance that must be uncovered in order to be able to understand how public policy decisions are made and who benefits from them. This means examining the composition of the governing structures and the interlocks they produce, with members participating in two or more of these bodies, identifying the most central actors according to the number of positions they hold in the network, the interlocks they produce and the capacity to mediate between think tanks and groups, transmit information, knowledge and points of view and, consequently, to foster policy and epistemic communities that are capable of defining public policy agendas and disseminating new ideas.

Governing bodies vary greatly, depending on the type of think tank and also on the history of each research centre. Some have a very simple governance structure, with only a board of directors (CIDAC and IMCO), while others combine different governance structures, including academic councils and coordinating structures (CIDE, COLMEX, ITAM and most academic research centres). All the members of these structures were included, along with the experts and rank and file researchers, because they often make the connections. Therefore, the main criterion was not to leave out anybody with the potential of generating interlocks, since a member of the board in one think tank may be an expert affiliated with another.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the most active members of the network were counted in, particularly those producing two or more connections—that is those capable of communicating information and knowledge relevant to the process of policy-making. But, as will be seen in the following paragraphs, very few individuals have accumulated the social capital associated with these positions.

Considering all of these criteria, a total of 2831 positions in the 55 think tanks of the network are held by a total of 2555 individuals. Out of these, only 156 hold two positions, 23 hold three positions, 14 individuals hold four positions, four have five, two have six and only one individual controls seven positions. That is, 200 persons (151 men and 49 women) participate actively in the network with two or more positions, and 44 individuals hold three or more positions (of whom only eight are women). These are the big linkers, having a greater control over the social capital and the dynamics of the network as a whole. For this reason, only those with two or more positions were considered when calculating centrality measures (degree and eigenvector), the articulation of



**Fig. 2.1** Mexican think tank network in 2015. *Source* Own research. Numbers in parenthesis indicate the group to which the think tank belongs. The thickness of the line indicates the number of directors and/or researchers in common

groups and intermediation positions, and the characteristics of the network in general (see Fig. 2.1). A total of 12 components were found in the network, with the largest component including 44 think tanks and 2396 individuals. This means that 11 think tanks and 159 individuals were isolated from the main component. All 44 think tanks in the main component (Fig. 2.1) are connected either directly or indirectly, although the distance between them varies.

Thirteen groups of think tanks have been identified in the main component of the network. They are constituted according to the number of affiliations in common and the distance between the think tanks, often revealing a common social purpose and research agenda, as in the following cases:

- The six think tanks constituting Group 1 share a strong commitment to a free market ideology and individual liberty.
- Group 2 is made up of three think tanks (two independent and one academic), converging around security concerns.
- The four members of Group 3 (one independent, two business affiliated and a consultancy firm) have a strong business orientation.

- The main common concerns of the six think tanks integrating Group 5 (three academic, two independent and a state think tank) are social justice, gender and civil rights.
- Four think tanks in Group 6 (three independent and one consultancy firm) share an interest in economic growth and performance, transparency and accountability.
- Three think tanks belonging to Group 7 converge around problems of social justice, transparency, political rights and the rule of law (see Fig. 2.1 with the number in parentheses indicating the group to which the think tank belongs).

In short, while some groups defend and promote a free market, individual liberties and economic liberalism in general (Groups 1, 3 and 6), other groups cohere around social equality and justice (Groups 5 and 7). Only Group 1 is basically committed to disseminating the neoliberal doctrine, while the remaining groups focus on influencing policy-making in different spheres, corresponding to Fischer and Plehwe's classification (see Chap. 7 in this volume). However, these and the rest of the groups are all connected by those think tanks that have high centrality and intermediation measures, as can be seen in Table 2.2, which shows the ten most central think tanks of the largest component controlling the main connecting nodes between all groups. Seven of these think tanks are independent and three (CIDE, COLMEX and CEDAN) are academic think tanks. Except for Groups 2, 11, 12 and 13, all the groups are present in this core. Group 6 is represented twice (see Fig. 2.1) by two think tanks (México Cómo Vamos and México Evalúa) created in

**Table 2.2** The most central Mexican think tanks, 2014

<i>Group</i>	<i>Think tank</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Nearness</i>	<i>Intermediation</i>	<i>Eigenvector</i>
10	COMEXI	60.465	68.254	27.143	52.239
5	CEEY	60.465	70.492	30.711	51.512
6	MEXCVAMOS	41.86	61.429	8.919	43.698
9	IMCO	34.884	57.333	3.964	39.964
7	CIDE	32.558	58.108	5.637	37.391
1	IPEA	30.233	53.75	8.774	33.234
6	MEXICOEVALUA	27.907	53.086	5.029	33.06
8	COLMEX	27.907	54.43	14.765	29.086
3	FUNSALUD	18.605	50.588	0.169	27.242
4	CEDAN	23.256	53.75	4.67	25.889

the past few years (2013 and 2009, respectively) but have moved rapidly to the centre of the network.

Although there is not sufficient space here to analyze all the groups identified in the network, three in particular are worth examining in more detail, since they are representative of the trends taking place in the field of power of Mexican think tanks.

Group 1 pulls together six think tanks, five of which are independent; two (Fundación FIL and RELIAL) are part of Latin American networks (see Chap. 7) with one (Banxico) a state think tank. All endorse a free-market ideology and strongly advocate individual liberty. The most central think tank of the group is the Instituto de Pensamiento Estratégico Ágora (IPEA), founded in 2008 and self-defined as ‘a private, independent, apolitical and non-profit think tank’. The activities of IPEA are preoccupied with defending the rule of law, economic development, high standards in education, governability, democracy and civil society, and social cohesion, focusing on the development of youth, research and public policy proposals. The board of trustees includes the CEOs of large Mexican companies and subsidiaries of foreign corporations (for example, Bimbo, Concord, Yakult, Cinépolis and FEMSA). The list of foreign partners includes the Ludwig Von Mises Institute, the Atlas Economic Research Foundation, the Institute of International and European Affairs, the Europa Institute and the Acton Institute (from Argentina). Since 2009, this think tank, together with the Ludwig Von Mises Institute, has presented the Legion of Liberty award for those ‘individuals who have proven to be the absolute defenders of individual liberty in any given part of the world’<sup>6</sup>; 66% of funding comes from private corporations.<sup>7</sup>

For the six think tanks comprising Group 5 (three academic, two independent and a state think tank), social justice, civil rights and gender are the most important issues in their agendas. Centro de Estudios Espinoza Yglesias (CEEY), sponsored by the Espinosa Rugaría Foundation, has the highest centrality in this group. It was created in 2005 as a ‘private, independent, apolitical and non-profit think tank’ with the purpose of generating ideas through research and the improvement of public debates and policy-making. Although it values the free market as the best mechanism to achieve economic development, it acknowledges its limitations and the need for public intervention when necessary. It has faith in education, gender equality and economic prosperity as the keys to social mobility; individual property rights are just

as important as collective rights for achieving economic growth and a peaceful coexistence; and democracy based on the rule of law and division of powers is considered essential to advance economic, political and social development.<sup>8</sup> In short, this is a social version of liberalism rooted not only in the set of relations with other think tanks in the group and beyond but also in its research agenda. In contrast to the other groups, the think tanks in Group 5 all follow an agenda focused on social justice, gender equality and equality of rights. GIRE, for example, was founded in 1991 to defend women's rights and has become increasingly active in the media and lobbying legislatures at the state and national levels to educate and offer information, decriminalize abortion and support victims of sexual abuse. Coneval was founded in 2005 as a research centre focusing on poverty, economic inequality and wealth distribution. Although it was founded as a state think tank, it has become increasingly autonomous. The remaining three think tanks in this group are academic institutions.

Group 6 integrates four think tanks, three of them independent, with one (CMM) a consultancy firm. Although recently founded (2013), México Cómo Vamos has become the most central think tank of this group, closely followed by México Evalúa (founded in 2009). These two think tanks are densely interlinked, sharing six members, and they have become watch groups generating statistics to monitor economic, social and political processes. CIDAC, which was created in 1984, has a more marginal position, but it is also quite influential. These three independent think tanks are connected to free-market global networks, among others the Atlas Network and the Emerging Economies Think Tank Alliance for High Quality Growth. They all share a commitment to economic liberalism that permeates their research agenda; in particular, the main purpose of México Cómo Vamos is to contribute to economic growth, generating statistics to measure growth, competition and competitiveness, employment, inflation, investment and access to capital, as well as identifying the main obstacles to growth (problems related to the rule of law, corruption and trust, among others). Closely connected to the network (see Fig. 2.1), México Evalúa aims to generate new ideas, knowledge and evaluation models in order to improve the efficiency and quality of public administration through a continuous monitoring and evaluation of the process of policy-making (design, implementation and results). The research team of this think tank is integrated by 12 young academics, six of whom graduated from ITAM and five from CIDE.

UNAM is only present in the administrative staff. This composition is quite common in other independent think tanks, and it shows how certain academic think tanks hold a central place in the network not only as a source of authority and legitimacy regarding the knowledge produced on different policy areas (from gender, justice and poverty policies to economic policies, transparency and accountability) but also as a source of recruitment for independent think tanks and, consequently, validation and reproduction of the views prevailing in these academic institutions. Research teams of think tanks with a more neoliberal orientation tend to be controlled by alumni from CIDE, ITAM, Tecnológico de Monterrey<sup>9</sup> and other private universities, whereas think tanks endorsing social liberal views tend to integrate more plural academic teams.

The tensions in the Mexican think tank network and field of power are complex and manifold: right-wing think tanks tend to endorse a very radical version of neoliberalism focusing on free markets, private property, free trade, individual liberty and responsibility, which they claim should be considered universal values. Out of these only one—COPARMEX—promotes neoliberal values and policies in the economic domain, but is conservative in the social domain, particularly regarding family and sexual values. These think tanks reflect and elaborate on the dominant ideas of an economic *laissez-faire* liberalism dating back to the eighteenth century. But liberal think tanks are very heterogeneous, replicating many of the contradictions of the liberal philosophy (see Bellamy 1992). While some of these think tanks privilege individual rights and freedoms, private property and a small state, others give greater weight to social and political rights and values (economic, social and political equality), public goods and, when necessary, state intervention. In addition, some favour academic research and intellectual proficiency, but have become increasingly vocal when promoting the ideas and analysis they produce. Other more progressive think tanks and experts have become activists, clearly committed to the interests they represent and defend. New ideas on specific public policies (on education, health, gender, energy and finance, among others) are usually aligned to the political vision and preferences that experts and think tanks support—for example those in line with free market, anti-state, libertarian ideologies versus those more in line with equality, social and political rights, and justice.

## STRATEGIES TO SHAPE POLICY-MAKING

Although it is not easy to weigh the influence of think tanks in the adoption of public policies—as acknowledged by several authors (Abelson 2000, 2004; Rich 2004; Stone and Denham 2004)—Mexican think tanks combine several strategies, most notably the networks constructed by the governing boards and experts of think tanks that we examined in the previous section; lobbying and other forms of pressure and negotiation with various agencies of the executive and legislative that have become progressively more open and institutionalized; and an increasing use of the media for several purposes, including creating a favourable view of certain reforms and weakening resistance, promoting checks and balances, demanding accountability, evaluating and monitoring the performance of public administration and officials. These strategies are pursued especially by neoliberal think tanks and experts, although social liberal think tanks have accumulated greater expertise in opening spaces of action within the field of power.

The network that interlocks think tanks and experts with a more or less academic or technocratic profile forms a field of power within which these actors struggle to control the orientation of public policies and practices. This field alone becomes a powerful mechanism of pressure and negotiation, influencing key areas of the administration and public opinion, since experts and leaders generating the connections are present in multiple spaces inside and outside the network where relevant decisions are made and dominant discourses constructed. Furthermore, this network overlaps with corporate networks and fields of power—national and international—as well as with global think tanks, such as the Trilateral Commission, Think-20, NACC, the Ludwig Von Mises Institute and the Atlas Economic Research Foundation. Prominent members of the corporate network can be found among those who have a greater presence in the Mexican think tank network—that is those who hold two or more positions on boards of directors, or who have become affiliated experts and academics. At least 16 out of the 200 big linkers of the think tank network belong to the corporate network too, notably Valentín Díez Morodo and Daniel Servitje Montull, holding four positions each in the think tank network, Alberto Bailleres with three and Claudio González Laporte with two. All of them also hold a central position in the corporate network.

Furthermore, the network woven by Mexican think tanks connects with regional and global networks. Four linkers belong to the Trilateral Commission [TC] one of the most important global think tanks that brings together regional elites in North America, which has become actively involved in shaping regional institutions—particularly those stemming from NAFTA, among them María Amparo Casar and Carlos Heredia, both experts affiliated with CIDE (see Chap. 4). Four are the members of the Committee on Competitiveness of North America, an organization gathering ten big businesses from each country member of NAFTA. As seen before, COMEXI—the most central think tank in the Mexican network (see Table 2.2)—is a member of Think 20, a global policy-making organization, where countries belonging to G-20 regularly meet to coordinate foreign policies, especially in the trade and financial spheres.

Lobbying is another mechanism whereby Mexican think tanks exert pressure on the process of policy-making. Executive lobbying is carried out today by former public officials who join or create consultancy firms when they leave office. From these firms, which have become an attractive professional option, former officials maintain close connections with the administration, profiting from the social and political capital accumulated throughout their careers. Although it is not possible to give a clear idea of the scope and dimension of this new political practice here (often referred to in the US literature as the revolving door), a few cases can illustrate this new form of lobbying the public administration. Among the most conspicuous consultancy firms lobbying and participating actively in public debates, three are influential: Soluciones Estratégicas, Protego-Evercore and Grupo de Economistas Asociados (GEA-ISA).

Soluciones Estratégicas was founded in 1994 by Jaime Zabludovsky, who holds seven positions in the Mexican think tank network, effects 36 interlocks and presides over COMEXI, the think tank with the highest centrality eigenvector (see Table 2.2). Soluciones Estratégicas is a consulting firm specializing in international trade, and Zabludovsky was a public official occupying high positions in the public administration under Zedillo. He was Deputy Secretary for International Trade Negotiations, designing Mexico's trade-negotiation strategy and administering NAFTA as well as other FTAs.<sup>10</sup>

Grupo de Economistas Asociados (GEA-ISA) is a consulting firm presided over by Jesús Reyes Heróles, who has maintained close contacts with many of the agencies in the administration where he held high

positions, particularly in Pemex, Banobras and the Ministry of Energy. At the beginning of 2012, Reyes Heróles formed a strategic partnership with Morgan Stanley to invest in the Mexican and Latin American energy sector and create a corporation leader in the region, clearly showing the use of privileged information for personal benefit. Such practice, which was sanctioned until recently, has become more difficult to prosecute because the legal boundaries have become very imprecise. According to John Moon, a partner and managing director of Morgan Stanley Private Equity, due to his positions as Secretary of Energy and Director of Pemex, Reyes Heróles ‘has an unmatched network of relationships across the energy industry ... which will be invaluable in generating attractive new investment opportunities for Morgan Stanley Private Equity’.<sup>11</sup>

In turn, Protego-Evercore, founded in 1996 by Pedro Aspe soon after he left his post as Secretary of Finance, offers financial engineering services to several state agencies to obtain funding in the international markets. The funding he negotiates for municipal and state entities is oriented to infrastructure projects, assistance in issuing and managing public debt and development of financial institutions—again, closely resembling the functions he performed as Secretary of Finance.

Although lobbying the legislature—another strategy to influence the definition of public policies—was not formerly common in Mexico, it has now become a political practice that is formally organized, institutionalized and even regulated (Alba Vega 2006; Salas Porras 2009). This practice is frequently carried out by think tanks—particularly independent think tanks and those affiliated with consulting firms, academic institutions and business associations.<sup>12</sup> Out of the 56 think tanks on our database, at least 42 undertake legislative lobbying, either directly or indirectly. All of those affiliated with business associations (in particular, Coparmex, Concamin, CCE and CEESP) do so with the help of special departments and teams dedicated to putting pressure on legislators. In addition, out of the 20 independent think tanks, at least eight lobby the legislature, notably IMCO and INSYDE—the former even belongs to the Competitiveness Committee of both chambers, besides a systematic dialogue and periodical meetings with Congressmen; the latter also cooperates with both chambers on security issues. At least eight out of the 11 academic think tanks have been found lobbying the legislature, Colmex and CIDE being clear examples of this practice in action. Colmex participates in several legislative committees and CIDE

has agreed on several contracts and the organization of events with legislators. Parliamentary hearings have become an increasingly common practice, providing experts and think tanks with the opportunity to push legislation in a given direction, as in the case of the anti-corruption legislation mentioned before, as well as in the reforms to the laws and by-laws in the telecommunication and energy sectors.

The previous strategies to influence policy-making compounds the effect when they overlap with the use of media. An active presence in TV and radio broadcasting, newspaper columns and magazine editorials has become crucial for propagandizing ideas, influencing public opinion and building consensus around the reforms and public policies promoted. According to Kuntz (2012, quoted in Stone 2015, p. 5), it is a widespread strategy among think tanks ‘to influence public opinion first, then governments will follow’, particularly in the case of independent think tanks interested in socializing the results of their research, their proposals and their political philosophy. Out of the 56 think tanks in our database, at least 46 participate regularly in news media programmes and discussions, and 13 of the 20 independent think tanks—notably IMCO, CIDAC, COMEXI and ETHOS—do so. ETHOS has organized numerous activities to disseminate its ‘model of responsible government’ in Mexico and Latin America in the media.<sup>13</sup> IMCO is probably the independent think tank that has the most intense presence in the media, including news programmes on radio and TV, several newspapers and magazines, such as *El Economista*, *Este País* and *El Financiero*, and TV news programmes on Foro TV, MVS Radio and many others. In all these spaces, IMCO presents research results on competitiveness, transparency, corruption and other issues.

CIDAC has also considerably expanded its participation in the printed and digital media, offering regular institutional briefings to newspapers and interviews on TV news programmes. This think tank is presided over by Luis Rubio, who regularly writes columns in national (*Reforma*) and US newspapers (*The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*), where he writes on problems of justice, competition, individual rights and liberties. He is also a member of the Trilateral Commission, which links him to American and international elites.

In short, although it is very difficult to demonstrate the impact of all these think tanks in the process of policy-making and in the transformation of the Mexican political economy, all the strategies and activities analyzed converge around how they try to redefine the limits between

state, market and society. Some of them argue in favour of a much smaller state, making great efforts to retreat its presence permanently from multiple areas of the economy and society. Other think tanks put more pressure on issues regarding transparency, and the accountability and efficiency of public officials. A third group focuses on human and social rights. A few think tanks work simultaneously in all of these directions (e.g. CIDE and CEEY), but if this is the case, different teams and individual experts are involved. However, their purpose is not only to influence state agencies and officials but also to naturalize the core principles embedded in the liberal policies they pursue and quite frequently to legitimize strategies and policies that have been decided beforehand.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The transformations that have occurred in the landscape of Mexican think tanks have led to the constitution of a field of power overlapping and mediating with other fields (parliamentary, corporate, media and information and knowledge, among others), but amplifying enormously the voice of a small group of experts and brokers who have doubtlessly become part of the ruling elite. This group plays a key role in constituting, disseminating and naturalizing a neoliberal-technocratic discourse. Its members procure enormous financial, social and intellectual resources to organize multiple forums and events, whereby they promote, defend and legitimize the market-centred policies advanced over the last three decades (privatization, deregulation and the retreat of the state from the economy). In the process, they more or less deliberately reinterpret historical experiences and refashion national identities.

At the same time, several think tanks within the network and field of power build up an increasingly coherent social liberal discourse that challenges some of the main tenets of the neoliberal project. They put forward policy proposals to tackle the problems stemming from the neoliberal policies pursued, particularly the problems of corruption, insecurity, concentration of economic, social and cultural resources, and social and human rights. All these groups struggle for the control of the cultural resources embedded in the network, in particular, the criteria by which knowledge and ideas can be certified and validated.

The field of think tanks is becoming ever more powerful within the national structure of power, due to three processes that feed back into one another: an increasingly dense network woven by the organizations

involved in the field, including private actors; increased national and international influence in the knowledge regime; and the production and legitimation of policy knowledge and policy discourse. This is all controlled by a smaller group of experts, political intermediaries and large corporate leaders, who have become the key links connecting the most influential elites in the region. In this way, a policy community has been constituted that has increasingly become involved with the community of regional and global policy wonks and hacks, following tropes, practices and discourses that are very similar to those of their counterparts around the globe.

Mexican think tanks are externally oriented research centres—that is they produce reports, monitor processes and have an active presence in the media, building networks of national, regional and global scope, and organizing public discussions and congressional hearings. Their aim is to convince public officials and the public opinion in general that their policy proposals are grounded in sound and objective research. Their sources of authority and legitimacy depend on the quality of their research and the capacity to translate it into a more common language that is easier for policy-makers, regulators and the public at large to grasp, in this way connecting ‘academic research with the real world, knowledge and power, science and politics’ (Stone 2015, p. 3). Mexican think tanks are thus especially good at generating consensual power, becoming ‘permanent persuaders’ while simultaneously trying to look neutral.

## NOTES

1. Several authors acknowledge the confusion created when this concept is translated. For example, Desmoulin (2009, p. 2) notes that in French there is no equivalent to the term ‘think tank’, which has been translated as *‘réservoir intellectuel’*, *‘boîte à penser’* (Béland 2000, p. 253) or *‘institut de recherche’*, *‘laboratoire d’idées’*, *‘cercle de réflexion’* and *‘boîte à idées’* (Desmoulin 2009). In Spanish, it is common to use the English term (Tello Beneitez 2013), but terms like *‘tanque de pensamiento’*, *‘tanque pensante’*, *‘laboratorio de ideas’* and *‘centro de pensamiento’* are being used more often.
2. Bourdieu (2005) defines the field of power as a network of relations between organizations and agents competing to control resources in differentiated spaces (economic, cultural, social and symbolic). The structure of each field—that is the predominating pattern of relations—guides

the strategies of the actors (agents and organizations) to maximize social capital. Each field constitutes an arena of struggles through which the power structures is constituted and reconstituted.

3. All think tanks affiliated with business associations (except COECE) were founded before the 1980s.
4. Among others, the Instituto Mexicano del Café, Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Comisión Nacional de Zonas Áridas, Comisión Nacional de Fruticultura (all of which operated as decentralized research centres) and the Centro de Investigación sobre el Desarrollo Rural (depending on the Secretary of Planning and Budget, SPP).
5. To construct the database, all the members of the boards were included, as were all the academic researchers, members of councils of different types (administrative or academic), advisers, committees and, in the case of international think tanks such as the Konrad Adenauer and Ebert Foundations, representatives of these organizations.
6. Prize recipients include Lech Wałęsa from Poland in 2009, Margaret Thatcher from the United Kingdom in 2009, Lorenzo Servitje from Mexico in 2010 and Álvaro Uribe from Colombia in 2011.
7. See <http://ipea.institute/nosotros.html>, accessed 24 January 2015.
8. See <http://www.ceey.org.mx/site/ideario-ceey>, accessed 25 January 2015.
9. Most researchers at CIEP come from Tecnológico de Monterrey, see <http://ciep.mx/nosotros>, accessed 25 January 2015.
10. See [http://www.wikinest.com/stock/Grupo\\_TMM,\\_S.A.\\_\(TMM\)/Jaime\\_Zabludovsky\\_Kuper](http://www.wikinest.com/stock/Grupo_TMM,_S.A._(TMM)/Jaime_Zabludovsky_Kuper), accessed 24 January 2015.
11. See <http://www.morganstanley.com/about/press/print/dceea7cb-495a-40ab-904d-5b672faef863.html>, accessed 5 January 2015.
12. The distinction between policy advice and lobbying tends to be blurred, making restrictions to the latter difficult to implement, as several authors acknowledge (see Lipton et al. 2014; Medvetz 2014).
13. See [http://www.ethos.org.mx/index\\_esp.html](http://www.ethos.org.mx/index_esp.html), accessed 24 January 2015.

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