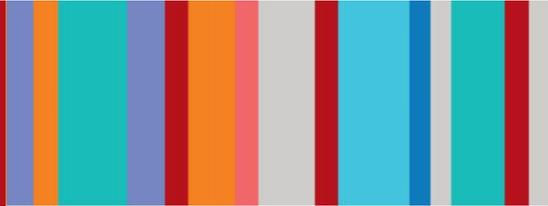




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FINAL REPORT

Think tanks-University Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa

Executive Summary: A Synthesis Report on 10 Country Studies

Partnership for African Social & Governance Research

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Executive Summary

Since the post-colonial period, universities have played a key role in leading and providing training and research in many sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries. However, the rapid increase in the number of think tanks and their prominence on the global scene is changing the dynamics within which knowledge is generated at national, regional, and international levels. The politics of power, economic circumstances, and external influences have shaped the emergence, growth, and operations of both universities and think tanks in many countries. This has been further enhanced by the attainment of independence and the introduction of structural adjustment programmes.

A review of the literature reveals diverse relationships between think tanks and universities, ranging from short- to long-term and formal to informal collaboration, as well as both the institutional and individual need for collaboration in the interdisciplinary research landscape. Generally, universities and think tanks are thought to have both negative (competitive, or displacing) and positive (collaborative, complementary, and mutually reinforcing) relationships. It is evident that think tanks influence graduate teaching and curricula, and universities build the capacity of think tank researchers. However, the interaction of these two institutions in the knowledge landscape to connect research and teaching and inform policy necessitates a deeper analysis of the opportunities for more structured collaboration. To date, the relationship between think tanks and universities in the SSA context has not been fully explored. As such, this paper details how think tanks and universities in SSA interrelate and explores the factors that influence these relationships.

The Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) and the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) undertook a 10-country study to address this topic by asking two overarching questions:

- What is the nature of relationships between think tanks and universities?
- What is the influence of partner or funding organizations on these relationships?

Based on these two questions the study examines:

- The types of relationships at institutional and individual levels (formal and informal) in four different areas: research, training/education, policy dialogue, and consultancy;
- The main drivers of the relationships, taking into consideration the context in which universities and think tanks operate;
- The influence of key players in the relationships;
- Key barriers to more effective relationships and how these can be overcome; and,
- Actions to foster better relationships between universities and think tanks.

The study used common survey tools and interview questions. It involved a select group of universities, think tanks and third-party organisations in 10 African countries: Benin, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The findings from the study primarily touch on the complexity of relationships, blurred lines of formality, strengthened outcomes, clear goals, and the role of donors. Overall, the study underscores the need for strong collaboration between universities and think tanks as evidenced by lessons from the 10 study countries.

Firstly, the results demonstrate that universities and think tanks bring different but complementary skills and resources to the table. The relationships between think tanks and universities are complex, involving diverse social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions. There are differences in operational modes, work ethics, ideologies, and management styles between universities and think tanks. Conspicuous gaps include the lack of a skilled human resource to facilitate relationships; platforms which create spaces, opportunities, and innovations around which relationships can be fostered; and financial and technological resources for tools to support collaborations. In particular, bureaucracy in universities tends to frustrate both university staff and think tanks when they try to set up collaborative relationships. Universities and think tanks therefore require strong communication strategies, transparency, and leadership to mutually benefit each other. Each institution needs to understand its comparative advantage in order to embrace a mutually beneficial agenda.

Secondly, the distinction between whether collaboration is formal or informal (as well as individual or institutional) is often blurred. Personal relationships are a catalyst for institutional trust. The process of working together often begins as informal, ad-hoc or intermittent contact between individuals, and becomes more formal as the collaboration grows. Motivations for collaboration by individuals range from the need to improve effectiveness and efficiency to the pursuit of individual interests. Even where initial arrangements are formal and institutional, they are nourished and sustained by individuals researching and training together. A quest to optimise collaboration therefore needs to embrace all of these connections.

Thirdly, collaboration can lead to stronger outcomes. There is great interest in collaboration between universities and think tanks, not only among the institutions themselves and individuals working in them, but also among organisations that use and fund policy research, training, policy dialogue, and consultancy. Potentially useful synergies include improved quality of research outputs and training, networking, increased visibility, monetary gains, and capacity enhancement. Generally, collaborations appear to complement each other in research and training, but to a lesser extent in policy dialogue and consultancy.

Fourthly, collaborations lead to greater success when those involved have common and clear goals. The desire by the two types of institutions to influence the research agenda in their own favour can derail collaborative opportunities. This is because of the knowledge generation-policy influence nexus: university staff view generating knowledge and publication as key to promotion at universities, while think tanks view informing policy as more important. Often, reaching a balance between knowledge generation and policy influence is a challenge that can affect potential collaboration.

Finally, there are mixed results as to the role that donors play in supporting or facilitating think tank-university relations, with some reporting that very few donors make collaboration a pre-condition for funding. Considering that collaboration depends on stable funding, suggestions for donors include the promotion of think tank-university collaboration in their Call for Proposals and in other funding streams, and the facilitation of opportunities for universities and think tanks to meet. Donors, while paying attention to country specific contexts, can help the two institutions to explore the typology of different forms of research and consensus building on how to integrate policy and knowledge research.

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