Do Think Tanks (Still) Matter for Africa's Development?

History, Roles, and Challenges

Discussion Paper 04/2024

Adrian Joseph

October 2024

The Brenthurst Foundation

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About the Author

Adrian Joseph is a Machel-Mandela Fellow at the Brenthurst Foundation. Prior to joining the Brenthurst Foundation, Adrian served as a Konrad Adenauer Stiftung scholar and an intern at the South African Institute of International Affairs where he worked in the Climate Change and Natural Resources Programme. His interests focus on issues relating to the just energy transition and natural resource governance in Africa and he has published several op-eds and research publications on this topic.

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Summary

This research paper focuses on the history, role, and challenges of African think tanks in promoting Africa's socio-economic development. The work builds on the Royal United Services Institute and Brenthurst Foundation's joint discussion paper on the 2009 Tswalu Dialogue which focused on the think tank and advisory business in Africa. In short, the research paper demonstrates that while Africa has a proud history of think tanks, many of these institutions face serious sustainability challenges which undermine their ability to play a unique role in Africa's development.

The paper is structured into three main sections. It starts by giving a short overview of the history of the think tank industry, before discussing the main challenges facing African think tanks today and concluding by providing some tentative recommendations to address these challenges. While the research relies mostly on South African examples and anecdotes, the hope is that this contribution will give some constructive guidance to think tanks across the continent.

Overview of the History, Role, and Challenges of Think Tanks

Though widely used, the term 'think tank' has remained ambiguous due to the substantial diversity in the historical development and organisational makeup of these organisations. Part of the challenge of definition stems from the remarkable growth in the number and diversity of think tanks over the past century starting from a handful of principally Western institutions in the 1920s to thousands of organisations situated across the world today.[1] Despite the term acting as a verbal container for a wide variety of organisations, there is at least a consensus that the essential role of a think tank should be to conduct and promote research aimed at influencing policy issues relevant to national governments and other centres of decision-making.[2] As a caveat, it is important to note that this idealised approach to policy influence presupposes a commitment to certain values (e.g. transparent governance and funding structures) which not all institutions who self-describe as think tanks necessarily embody or practice.

While the establishment of think tanks originated in the Anglo-American context, these institutions have spread to different countries across the world and adapted their work to the specific political, cultural and legal contexts in which they found themselves. For example, the Chinese government has promoted think tanks with "Chinese characteristics" whereas many German think tanks have historically been founded on close associations with their respective political parties.[3] Given that this institutional growth was by no means inevitable, the development of a small niche industry into a burgeoning global marketplace covering every thematic area imaginable is a remarkable testament to the globalisation of public policy.

While much of the historical development of the think tank sector can be attributed to Western institutions, sub-Saharan Africa has a profound history in this sector and boasts many credible think tanks across the continent. Although the great expansion of think tanks in Africa did not begin until the late 1980s and early 1990s, these

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[1] Diane Stone and Stella Ladi, 'Policy Analysis and Think Tanks in Comparative Perspective', *Routledge Handbook on Comparative Policy Analysis*, May 2017, Available at https://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/id/eprint/80578/ (Accessed 13 October 2024).

[2] Rosa Balfour, 'What are Think Tanks for? Policy Research in the Age of Anti-Expertise', *London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) IDEAS*, December 2017, Available at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107586/ (Accessed 10 October 2024).

[3] Nis Grünberg and Grzegorz Stec, 'Whispering Advice, Roaring Praises: The Role of Chinese Think Tanks Under Xi Jinping', *Mercator Institute for China Studies,* May 2024, Available at https://merics.org/en/report/whispering-advice-roaring-praises-role-chinese-think-tanks-under-xi-jinping (Accessed 11 October 2024).

institutions have been in existence on the continent since the early part of the twentieth century, with institutions such as the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) being established as early as 1934.[4] Part of the reason it took some time for the think tank landscape to flourish in Africa is due to the manner in which many post-colonial governments consolidated governing power after independence and marginalised these and other knowledge-based institutions from the policy process.[5] Consequently, the historical development of these institutions across the continent has been periodic and uneven as only four countries (South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana) host more than 10 think tanks according to the latest Open Think Tank Directory database – see below.[6] Despite the good work being done by many of these organisations, the sector is once again facing numerous internal and external challenges which has led commentators such as Robin Niblett, Distinguished Fellow at Chatham House, to express concern over their precarious future: "In sub-Saharan Africa, where robust democratic debate coexists with an often opaque and sometimes violent and repressive political environment, an expansion in the number of think-tanks during the past decade now risks going into reverse owing to an overall lack of institutional capacity and funding."[7]

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[4] South African Institute of International Affairs, 'Our History', 2024, Available at https://saiia.org.za/about/our-history/ (Accessed 9 October 2024).
[5] Mwangi Kimenyi and Ajoy Datta, 'Think Tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa: How the Political Landscape Has Influenced Their Origins', *Overseas Development Institute,* December 2011, Available at https://odi.org/en/publications/think-tanks-in-sub-saharan-africa-how-the-political-landscape-has-influenced-their-origins/ (Accessed 5 October 2024).
[6] On Think Tanks Initiative, 'Open Think Tank Directory', 2016, Available at https://onthinktanks.org/open-think-tank-directory/ (Accessed 7 October 2024).
[7] Robin Niblett, 'Rediscovering a Sense of Purpose: The Challenge for Western Think Tanks', *International Affairs*, November 2018, Available at https://academic.oup.com/ia/article-abstract/94/6/1409/5162428?redirectedFrom=fulltext (Accessed 13 October 2024).
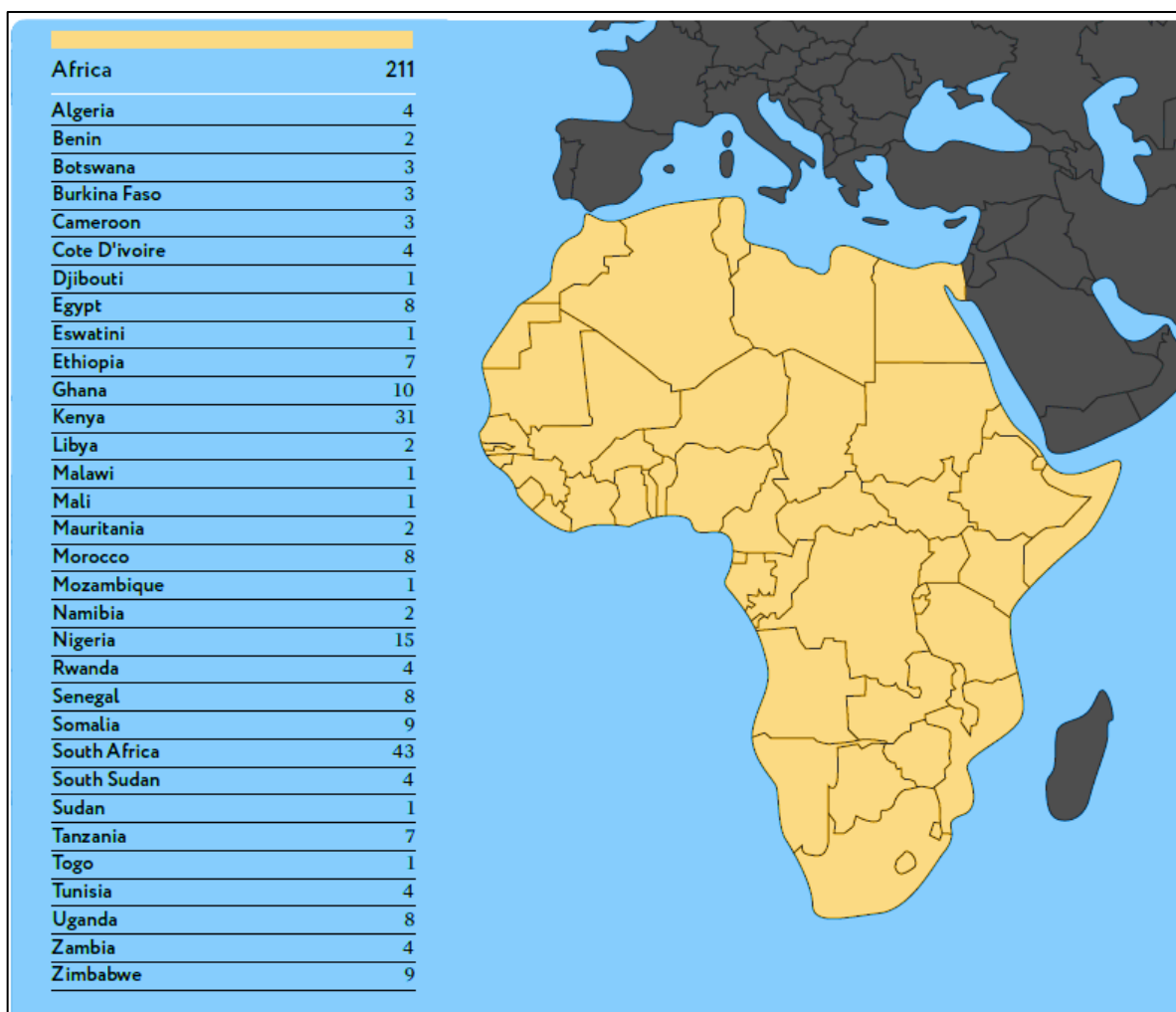
Africa	211
Algeria	4
Benin	2
Botswana	3
Burkina Faso	3
Cameroon	3
Cote D'ivoire	4
Djibouti	1
Egypt	8
Eswatini	1
Ethiopia	7
Ghana	10
Kenya	31
Libya	2
Malawi	1
Mali	1
Mauritania	2
Morocco	8
Mozambique	1
Namibia	2
Nigeria	15
Rwanda	4
Senegal	8
Somalia	9
South Africa	43
South Sudan	4
Sudan	1
Tanzania	7
Togo	1
Tunisia	4
Uganda	8
Zambia	4
Zimbabwe	9

Figure 1: Overview of the Number of Think Tanks Per Country on the African Continent[8]

Note: If a country is not listed it means that there are no think tanks registered in the Open Think Tank Directory under that country.

Before delving into the special challenges faced by African think tanks, it is helpful to discuss some of the general challenges which effect think tanks irrespective of their geography or focus area. First, the growing volume of (mis)information available to the public acts as a catalyst for political leaders who can gain many votes in election campaigns that feature no substantive discussions about policy alternatives or evidence.[9] While the populist backlash against the credibility of expertise stems partly from this surge in misinformation, think tanks must also do some self-reflection on

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[8] On Think Tanks Initiative, 'Think Tank State of the Sector 2020-2021: African Regional Brief', February 2022, Available at https://onthinktanks.org/publication/stateofthesector2020-2021/ (Accessed 8 October 2024).

[9] Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, 'The Role of African Think Tanks in a Post-Truth World', *South African Institute of International Affairs*, August 2017, Available at https://saiia.org.za/research/the-role-of-african-think-tanks-in-a-post-truth-world/ (Accessed 13 October 2024).

how unreported conflicts of interest, biased research outputs, and a lack of financial transparency has damaged the credibility of the sector.

The challenge of misinformation ties into a second challenge, namely that of credibility and perceptions of elitism traditionally associated with think tanks.[10] In this regard, think tanks are often criticised for producing work that is laden with jargon and focused on self-referential debates which have little relevance beyond a small expert community. Insofar as these criticisms are well-founded and made in good faith, there is a need for think tanks to explore ways in which their work can be made to resonate with audiences beyond expert circles without oversimplifying the essence of their message.

The third challenge is the growth of the policy-influence industry which has seen universities, management consultancies, political risk firms, and advocacy organisations all enter or expand their roles in the already competitive marketplace of ideas.[11] This overcrowded industry has brought home the reality to think tanks that the proverbial evidence does not speak for itself, and that policy prescriptions, however novel or groundbreaking, are no longer enough if these prescriptions do not end up in the right hands.[12]

This growing popular audience and list of competitors creates an organisational dilemma where think tanks must increasingly communicate the utility of their work to a wider segment of society without this additional demand undermining their core objective of producing policy-relevant research. In response to this dilemma, Rosa Balfour, Director of the Europe Programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, has reiterated the importance of think tanks balancing these competing demands in a way that does not distract from their core mission: "There is no harm in expanding activities and producing more literate and readable papers if this is an addition, rather than a substitute, to policy research. But quantity should not overshadow quality … There is no shortcut to this [high-quality research], and it cannot be substituted with a torrent of running commentaries on current events. Quality is the only antidote to the proliferation of opinion-givers."[13]

[10] Andrea Baertl, 'Deconstructing Credibility: Factors that Affect a Think Tank's Credibility', *On Think Tanks Initiative,* March 2018, Available at https://onthinktanks.org/publication/de-constructing-credibility-factors-that-affect-a-think-tanks-credibility/ (Accessed 10 October 2024).
[11] Nicolas Lux, 'Foreign Policy Think Tanks in Times of Crisis', *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, March 2021, Available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2021JR01/ (Accessed 7 October 2024).
[12] James McGann, 'Think Tanks Staying Relevant in Today's World', *Montaigne Institute*, October 2021, Available at https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/think-tanks-staying-relevant-todays-world (Accessed 12 October 2024).
[13] Rosa Balfour, 'What are Think Tanks for? Policy Research in the Age of Anti-Expertise', *London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) IDEAS*, December 2017, Available at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/107586/ (Accessed 10 October 2024).

Review of the Central Challenges in the African Think Tank Landscape

This section will discuss the wide range of challenges faced by African think tanks that undermine their growth, influence and long-term sustainability. For a snapshot of the African think tank sector, refer to the insightful graphic at the end of this section borrowed from the On Think Tank Initiative's State of the Sector Report for 2023.[14]

Funding

The biggest challenge facing think tanks in Africa is the need for them to secure reliable funding from a wide range of sources to retain organisational independence and consistently produce high-quality work. Think tanks' overdependence on foreign sources of funding creates a detrimental cycle where they must constantly seek project funding through proposals which deliver on the funder's agenda but are not always consistent with Africa's policy needs or the core mission of the relevant organisation.[15]

Even foreign funders have acknowledged the counterproductive nature of the present funding model as highlighted in research by the Centre for Global Development: "Those interviewed generally conceded that the historically prevalent model of partnerships between funders and institutions in SSA [Sub-Saharan Africa] has adversely affected the capacity of institutions in the region. Multiple funders acknowledged that the desire for immediate results within very specific programmatic areas has led to problematic and sometimes damaging partnerships, and the traditional project-focused and sector-oriented approach has complicated the development of research in the region through siloed funding streams."[16]

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[14] Andrea Baertl, Dustin Gilbreath, and Stephanie Nicolle, 'Think Tank State of the Sector 2023', *On Think Tanks Initiative,* October 2023, Available at https://onthinktanks.org/publication/think-tank-state-of-the-sector-2023/ (Accessed 11 October 2024).

[15] Guy Lodge and Will Paxton, 'Innovation in Think Tanks: Policy Influence and Change in Developing Countries, *Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce*, March 2017, Available at https://www.thersa.org/reports/innovation-in-think-tanks (Accessed 9 October 2024).

[16] Alex Ezeh and Jessie Lu, 'Transforming the Institutional Landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa: Considerations for Leveraging Africa's Research Capacity to Achieve Socioeconomic Development', *Centre for Global Development*, July 2019, Available at https://www.cgdev.org/publication/transforming-institutional-landscape-sub-saharan-africa-considerations-leveraging-africa (Accessed 7 October 2024).

Research-Policy Interface

This section describes some of the general as well as Africa-specific challenges in the policy interface. For starters, some of the tensions in the Africa knowledge and policy interface are generic, whereas others emanate from the specific context of particular countries. Generically speaking, the divergent rationales, timelines, and mindsets of policymakers and researchers often undermines cross-sectoral cooperation. For example, policymakers tend to downplay the potential contribution independent research can make and tend to overvalue their own understanding of policy problems. On the other hand, policy advisors tend to overstate the relevance of their recommendations while underappreciating the institutional constraints facing even well-intentioned policymakers.

Apart from these general obstacles to increased cooperation and research uptake, there are also many country-specific challenges. In South Africa for example, research by the German Development Institute on the research policymaking interface found that the legacy of the country's difficult past continues to manifest itself in prevailing mistrust between stakeholders, a deeply unequal education system, and a structurally underfunded research sector – all of which undermines the ability of knowledge-based institutions, such as think tanks, to contribute to policymaking.[17] Many of these challenges also extend to the relationship between knowledge-based institutions such as universities and think tanks which hampers their collective ability to collaborate and produce policy-relevant research.[18]

In addition to the abovementioned challenges, there are also more foundational research-related challenges which concern the manner in which evidence-based research is conceptualised and practiced. While the desire to inform policymaking with rigorous evidence is commendable, it is important for African think tanks to understand the policymaking terrain as an inherently political one. This is to caution against an overly narrow and rational view of the role of social science research findings in the policy process which undervalues the role of relevant political factors. While it may seem self-evident, it is important to recognise that the provision of policy advice is not solely a technical exercise, as whether policy advice is taken up is often ultimately determined by political calculus, as opposed to the quality and policy relevance of the research per se. This means that no linear theory of change or neatly

[17] Sven Grimm, 'The Interface Between Research and Policy-Making in South Africa: Exploring the Institutional Framework and Practice of an Uneasy Relationship', *German Development Institute,* 2018, Available at https://www.idos-research.de/discussion-paper/article/the-interface-between-research-and-policy-making-in-south-africa-exploring-the-institutional-framework-and-practice-of-an-uneasy-relationship/ (Accessed 4 October 2024).

[18] Partnership for African Social and Governance Research, 'Think Tank University Relations in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Synthesis Report on 10 Country Case Studies', March 2016, Available at https://www.pasgr.org/publication/think-tank-university-relations-in-sub-saharan-africa-a-synthesis-report-on-10-country-studies-2/ (Accessed 6 October 2024).

designed strategy document can replace the messy political work think tanks need to do to understand the power dynamics, both formal and informal, which help to explain why certain policy decisions are made (or not).[19]

Furthermore, the contradictory incentives at work for different players in the policymaking space can have adverse consequences for the credibility and intellectual autonomy of think tanks if they are not careful. Research on the discourse of evidence-based policymaking in South Africa has commented on the dangers latent in the relationship between research and policymaking: "In this struggle politicians and policymakers (even well-intentioned, responsible ones) will often seek to use the symbolic authority of 'scholarship' and 'science' to impart spurious legitimacy which well exceeds the real degree of certainty and clarity scholarship can properly claim … In this context, it is important to defend the critical independence of academic research, and not to allow a situation in which the need for 'user uptake' can cause researchers to abandon their integrity and independence, so that 'evidence-based policymaking' starts turning into 'policy-based evidence making'."[20]

Impact Measurement

Another important challenge for African think tanks concerns the reliable measurement of their impact on the policy process. In other words, does the work of African think tanks matter and how would one accurately gauge policy influence as a key impact metric? This is a difficult question for many institutions to answer confidently given the complexity of the attribution problem, the intangible nature of many think tank activities, and the significant organisational resources needed to create and implement well-designed monitoring and evaluation systems.[21] How does one for example, reliably measure the value of the time invested in building strong interpersonal connections with key policymakers or sharing career advice about the sector with aspiring university students?

With regards to impact, the challenge faced by African think tanks is how to go beyond a narrow focus on impact to a more nuanced conception that can still be manageably

[19] Guy Lodge and Will Paxton, 'Innovation in Think Tanks: Policy Influence and Change in Developing Countries, *Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce*, March 2017, Available at https://www.thersa.org/reports/innovation-in-think-tanks (Accessed 9 October 2024).

[20] Andre du Toit, 'Making Sense of 'Evidence': Notes on the Discursive Politics of Research and Pro-Poor Policy Making', September 2012, *Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies*, Available at https://www.researchtoaction.org/2012/11/making-sense-of-evidence-notes-on-the-discursive-politics-of-research-and-pro-poor-policy-making/ (Accessed 12 October 2024).

[21] Sarah Bressan and Wade Hoxtell, 'Whose Bright Idea Was That? How Think Tanks Measure Their Effectiveness and Impact', *Global Public Policy Institute*, October 2023, Available at https://gppi.net/2023/10/12/how-think-tanks-measure-their-effectiveness-and-impact (Accessed 11 October 2024).

measured in terms of social relevance. Moreover, the risk of a fixation with measuring impact is that it may create perverse organisational incentives to focus on those activities that can be easily quantified rather than those intangible activities that produce (actual) impact but are more difficult to measure. In response, many institutions seek to work within their resource constraints to approximate their impact by using semi-structured reflection processes or imperfect proxy indicators. To address this common challenge faced by think tanks, the Global Public Policy Institute has developed a framework for achieving and measuring impact which includes an indicator framework as well as a step-by-step implementation guide.[22]

Human Capital

A think tank's primary asset is its human capital as this is what it relies on to consistently produce quality analysis and sustain the organisation's reputation as a repository of credible policy advice.[23] Given the importance of this factor, one of the perennial challenges for African think tanks is the issue of a lack of human capital which has negative implications for the quality of research outputs and, by extension, the sustainability of the institution.[24] The inability of African think tanks to hire and retain talented staff stems from the more foundational challenge of funding (as discussed) and has damaging knock-on effects for the long-term sustainability of the sector. For example, many African organisations are heavily reliant on young interns to not only participate in the research process but also in the organisation of events, monitoring and evaluation, advocacy efforts etc. While this arrangement can act as a mutually beneficial stop-gap measure to address human capital constraints, without improved mentorship and career investment in these young researchers, the sector is unlikely to build a sustainable talent pipeline for the future.

Unfortunately, most African institutions are unable to offer long-term competitive employment packages to staff who are then attracted by international organisations who can often offer better remuneration and research opportunities. The frustration of investing in in-house capacity, only to see talented local individuals poached by international organisations with more resources, is a shared frustration of many African think tank leaders. This common sentiment was articulated by one leader of an African organisation as follows: "One of the difficulties, also, is how can you attract the

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Andrea Baertl, 'Deconstructing Credibility: Factors that Affect a Think Tank's Credibility', *On Think Tanks Initiative,* March 2018, Available at https://onthinktanks.org/publication/de-constructing-credibility-factors-that-affect-a-think-tanks-credibility/ (Accessed 10 October 2024).

[24] James McGann, Landry Signé, and Monde Muyangwa, 'The Crisis of African Think Tanks: Challenges and Solutions', *The Brookings Institute,* December 2017, Available at https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-crisis-of-african-think-tanks-challenges-and-solutions/ (Accessed 7 October 2024).

best people and support them in such a way that they will be stable and stay. Because what happens is sometimes you spend a lot of effort by doing some capacity building. And at the end, those people are attracted by other institutions. They have more funding; they have more opportunities. So, you have to start again, and again, and again."[25]

Contextual Factors

The next set of challenges facing African think tanks can broadly be summarised under the sub-heading of context. To understand how knowledge is produced and used in the political arena, think tanks must understand the particularities of their country's policymaking regime, its socio-economic circumstances, and the kinds of politics practised. Understanding these variables is important because the ability of a think tank to achieve impact is in part a product of various exogenous variables which shape an organisation's ability to successfully carry out its work. For example, research on the think tank sector in Africa has stressed the special importance of strategic communication given the general suspicion national governments have of institutions seeking to shape the national agenda: "In particular, the general political context in African states is very much unfavourable or outright hostile to think tanks. A key challenge is convincing governments that new ideas from independent institutions are not a threat or challenge to authority, but instead are a support tool. Overcoming this barrier requires careful presentation of ideas."[26]

Another relevant example is the nature of politics in the public service. Research on public service reform in South Africa by the New South Institute has argued that large parts of the public administration, far from being true epistemic communities aimed at genuine policy analysis, have become overridden by political practices which have sought the reproduction of party-political power to the detriment of evidence-informed policymaking. A genuine public policy process exists to bring together an epistemic community to study causes, gather evidence, make arguments, and devise interventions to address a certain public policy problem. In contrast, a 'mimetic' process is one that "… resembles a [genuine] policy process in that people are brought together, there are meetings and deliberations, and documents are written but, ultimately, there is no analysis (that is, no discussion of causes) and/or proposals are

[25] Alex Ezeh and Jessie Lu, 'Transforming the Institutional Landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa: Considerations for Leveraging Africa's Research Capacity to Achieve Socioeconomic Development', *Centre for Global Development*, July 2019, Available at https://www.cgdev.org/publication/transforming-institutional-landscape-sub-saharan-africa-considerations-leveraging-africa (Accessed 7 October 2024).
[26] Adrian Johnson, Terence McNamee, and Greg Mills, 'The Think Tank and Advisory Business in Africa', *The Brenthurst Foundation and The Royal United Services Institute,* July 2009, Available at https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/report-of-the-2009-tswalu-dialogue-the-think-tank-and-advisory-business-in-africa (Accessed 1 October 2024).

inconsistent with the analysis. In such situations, thinking is often normative and axiomatic and only evidence that confirms *a priori* conclusions is tolerated … In this context, almost anything can be justified, provided that it resonates with the *a priori* beliefs held by those making key decisions."[27] This divergence between the existence of genuine and superficial policy processes is just one example of the kind of challenge facing local think tanks wanting to make a worthwhile contribution to the national policy agenda.

Another contextual variable is the technical competence and capacity of the specific government in question to engage and implement policy. If a national government is ineffective in formulating and implementing public policy, it may be a more pragmatic strategy for a think tank to influence the national dialogue rather than a particular government policy position. To give another example, while many African think tanks may contribute to civil society by shaping public discourse, the total collective impact of a country's civil society on government decision-making remains ultimately beyond the control of any single organisation. In other words, having impact is in part a product of a think tank's internal strategy and in part a product of variables outside its control.[28] Therefore, African think tanks must consider how their dependence on other parts of the policy landscape (government, civil society, media) can act as a help or a hinderance to achieving the organisation's mission. In summary, there is a pressing need for more reflection on the challenges posed for think tanks in the policymaking process by the particular political and institutional context in Africa.

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[27] Ivor Chipkin, 'Democracy, Power and Evidence-Informed Policymaking: The Case of Public Service Reform in South Africa', *The New South Institute*, August 2024, Available at https://nsi.org.za/publications/democracy-power-and-evidence-informed-policy-making-the-case-of-public-service-reform-in-south-africa/ (Accessed 7 October 2024).
[28] Aprille Knox, Elizabeth Brown, and Courtney Tolmie, 'Linking Think Tank Performance, Decisions, and Context, *Results 4 Development*, July 2014, Available at https://r4d.org/resources/linking-think-tank-performance-decisions-context/ (Accessed 9 October 2024).

Africa
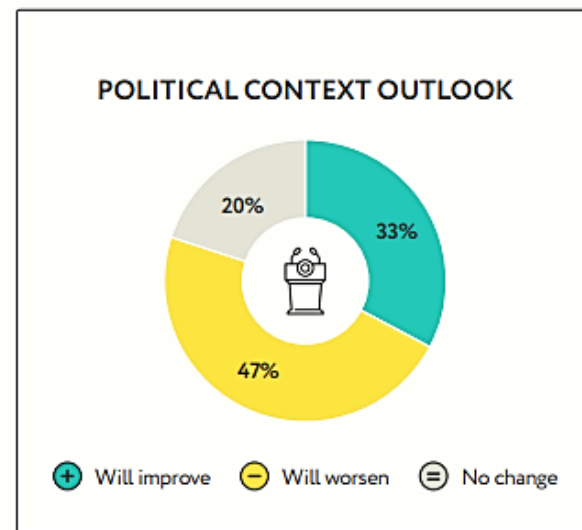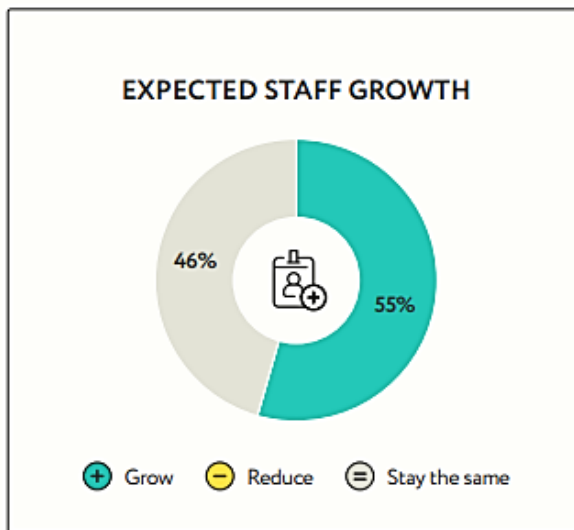
Africa   Global

AVERAGE THINK TANK AGE (YEARS)

23   31

COUNTRIES WITH THE MOST THINK TANKS

42 South Africa
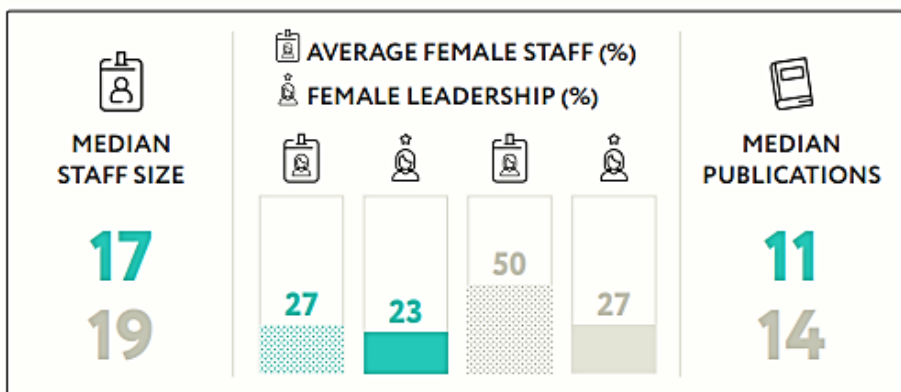
CITIES WITH THE MOST THINK TANKS

31 Nairobi

53% Said their operational context has become harder in the last year

MEDIAN STAFF SIZE

17
19

AVERAGE FEMALE STAFF (%)
FEMALE LEADERSHIP (%)

27   23   50   27

MEDIAN PUBLICATIONS

11
14

EXPECTED STAFF GROWTH

46%   55%

⊕ Grow   ⊖ Reduce   ⊜ Stay the same

DESIRED COMPETENCIES

→ **Management & leadership**
(organisational and financial management, team management and strategic partnerships)

KEY POLICY ISSUES

→ **Governance**
(corruption, strengthening institutions, and strengthening public trust)
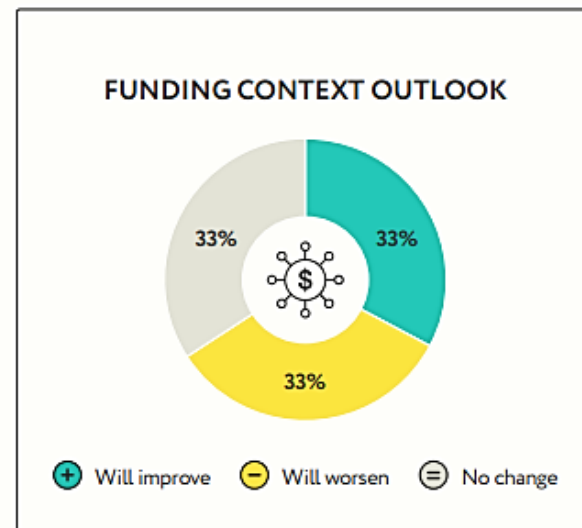
KEY CHALLENGES

→ **Financial issues & fundraising**
(fundraising, project-based funding, and limited funds)

→ **Evidence use & decision-making**
(engaging with policymakers and increasing evidence-informed decisions)

POLITICAL CONTEXT OUTLOOK

20%   33%   47%

⊕ Will improve   ⊖ Will worsen   ⊜ No change

33% Reported a worsening legal context

FUNDING CONTEXT OUTLOOK

33%   33%   33%

⊕ Will improve   ⊖ Will worsen   ⊜ No change

Data is based on 230 African think tanks in the Open Think Tank Directory and 33 responses from African thinktankers to the 2023 OTT think tank survey.

Recommendations and Considerations for African Think Tanks

This section will put forward a few key policy recommendations and research areas for African think tanks to consider given the history, context, and challenges discussed above. These considerations should be understood more as research suggestions for further avenues of exploration, rather than well-defined prescriptions for reform.

Explore Alternative Funding Models, Strategies and Partnerships

As discussed, financial resources are required to maintain the operational aspects of think tanks as well as to hedge against the risk of overdependence on certain donors influencing the research agenda in problematic ways. In the absence of regular core funding, African think tanks need to explore different avenues to achieve relative financial independence from national governments and foreign donors. This can be done by creating new funding streams through monetising research products or by building partnerships with the private and philanthropic sectors to explore new funding opportunities. There are already existing efforts to develop alternative funding models for resourcing the development of African think tanks through initiatives such as the African Capacity Building Foundation.

Invest in Human Capital Development Programmes for Young People

The credibility of a think tank fundamentally rests on its ability to attract and retain excellent staff who can consistently produce high-quality, policy-relevant, and evidence-based research. One way to respond to some of the challenges discussed is for African think tanks to focus on investing in bringing more young people into the fold. For example, African think tanks can engage with local universities to identify bright young students with strong research potential and a passion for improving society. These students can then be trained and guided on the standards and skills needed to produce policy relevant outputs, whereafter they can be offered opportunities to contribute to the work of think tanks through attending meetings, research assistance, and internship programmes. Examples of such youth development initiatives offered by think tanks includes the Brenthurst Foundation's Machel-Mandela Fellowship Programme among others.[29]

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[29] The Brenthurst Foundation, 'The Machel-Mandela Fellowship Programme', January 2022, Available at https://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/news/the-machel-mandela-fellowship-programme/ (Accessed 11 October 2024).

Highlight Comparative Advantages of Being a Locally Based Organisation

The comparative advantage of African think tanks stems from their embeddedness in the local context which gives them the ability to understand local political dynamics and engage local stakeholders in a way that external players often cannot. In many African countries, think tanks should emphasise and sharpen their role as a well-placed local research partner that can drive policy advice that is both informed by evidence and politically realistic. In fact, research on the role of think tanks in developing countries has confirmed the important contribution these organisations can make to "driving forward the politically savvy reforms upon which effective development depends."[30] For African think tanks to secure funding in an increasingly competitive marketplace of ideas, it is crucial for these institutions to promote and speak to this comparative strength.

Leverage Position as a Knowledge Broker to Foster Greater Collaboration

Another step that could be taken to improve both the organisational capacity and the quality of research outputs would be for African think tanks to facilitate greater collaboration with other knowledge-based institutions in the region. For example, think tanks can map out communities in policy or thematic areas and create spaces and opportunities for think tanks, universities, and other like-minded non-profit organisations to form a policy network. In this regard, research has highlighted the underappreciated role of African think tanks in brokering relationships between diverse stakeholders as a means of institutionalising evidence in the policy process.[31] There are already many interpersonal connections across different sectors which can be leveraged to create more formal collaborative opportunities where each party contributes its own comparative advantage to the process. An example of such a knowledge-sharing platform is the upcoming On Think Tanks Initiative annual conference which will take place in South Africa in 2025.[32]

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[30] Guy Lodge and Will Paxton, 'Innovation in Think Tanks: Policy Influence and Change in Developing Countries, *Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce*, March 2017, Available at https://www.thersa.org/reports/innovation-in-think-tanks (Accessed 9 October 2024).
[31] Farah Al Hadid, 'Key Findings from Four Case Studies on Evidence-Informed Policymaking in Africa', *On Think Tanks Initiative,* May 2024, Available at https://onthinktanks.org/publication/key-findings-from-four-case-studies-on-evidence-informed-policymaking-in-africa/ (Accessed 6 October 2024).
[32] On Think Tanks Initiative. 2024. *On Think Tanks Conference 2025*. Concept Note. Available: https://onthinktanks.org/conference/ott-conference-2025/ [October 13, 2024].

Improve How Organisational Impact is Measured and Communicated

In seeking to measure and communicate their impact, African think tanks need to be realistic about the added value that an extensive monitoring and evaluation approach can offer considering resource constraints. While well thought-out monitoring systems and indicators can have multiple benefits, it is important to remember that attempts to quantify certain aspects of a think tank's work cannot replace those elements which (truly) create impact such as strong internal review processes, highly capable and enthusiastic staff, and a stable operating environment.[33] Tied to the issue of impact measurement is that of communication. It is simply no longer enough to publish a neatly formatted report on an organisation's website and move on to the next project. Because thoughtful communication is central to achieving impact, African think tanks must pay more attention to tailoring and diversifying their means of communication. Whether it is through blog posts, engaging infographics or sophisticated data analysis, these institutions must find innovative ways to communicate their essential policy messages across different audience segments.[34]

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[33] Sarah Bressan and Wade Hoxtell, 'Whose Bright Idea Was That? How Think Tanks Measure Their Effectiveness and Impact', *Global Public Policy Institute*, October 2023, Available at https://gppi.net/2023/10/12/how-think-tanks-measure-their-effectiveness-and-impact (Accessed 11 October 2024).

[34] Results 4 Development, 'Policy Engagement and Communications Toolkit for Think Tank Researchers and Communication Officers', September 2024, Available at https://r4d.org/resources/policy-engagement-communications-toolkit-think-tank-researchers-communications-officers/ (Accessed 6 October 2024).

Conclusion

Despite the various challenges facing the sector, it should now be clear that local think tanks can play a unique role in driving Africa's development by bringing expert knowledge to bear on government decision-making. In concluding, one thoughtful participant's words at the Tswalu Dialogue on think tanks in Africa rings as true today as they did in 2009: "Unfortunately the task is not straightforward. Despite the mantra of 'African solutions for African problems' having been around for half a century, progress towards such solutions has been lacking. It can even be argued that the central failure of African development has been intellectual: on other continents, progress was preceded by a critical mass of policy thinkers aware of their local context but adapting the lessons of development elsewhere and forming political coalitions to effect it. Such policy thinkers are unlikely to be found in governments or African academia. The think tank sector therefore occupies an absolutely critical position in providing the intellectual basis for Africa's renewal."[35] If awareness of the serious challenges threatening the sustainability of the think tank sector in Africa are not addressed by investing in capacity building, exploring innovative funding models, and communicating impact success stories, then there is a real risk that many institutions will simply fold or drift into irrelevance in the coming years to the detriment of Africa's development.

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[35] Adrian Johnson, Terence McNamee, and Greg Mills, 'The Think Tank and Advisory Business in Africa', *The Brenthurst Foundation and The Royal United Services Institute,* July 2009, Available at https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/report-of-the-2009-tswalu-dialogue-the-think-tank-and-advisory-business-in-africa (Accessed 1 October 2024).