



African Heritage Institution

*AfriHeritage Policy Working Paper*

**The Future of Think-Tanks and Policy Advice:  
An African Perspective**



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## **Introduction**

Globally, humans are at crossroads in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are witnessing momentous developments across a spectrum of severe economic challenges, institutional realignments (Brexit), tumultuous climatic changes, socio-cultural and political conflicts, insecurity, terrorism, extreme inequality, poverty, social exclusions, and gender-based discriminations. In fact, the very existence of nation-states (as currently constituted) appears to be under severe pressure as challenges mount and it becomes increasingly clear that many policymakers are often overwhelmed. These policymakers lack coherent or effective responses to growing expectations and demands from increasingly aware and aggressive constituencies for jobs, salary increases, service delivery, quality of life improvements, etc. This questioning of the legitimacy of policymakers and other constituted authority often belies the objective reality of competing needs and severe budgetary limitations for problem solving. Such problems are despite the impact of technology-driven innovations in communication systems, which have created new tools to facilitate dissent while encouraging collective actions.

Threatened by the prospect of losing control, governments have become increasingly defensive, short-sighted, conservative, and opportunistic as they grope for answers. They have also resorted to populist postures and the use of sound bites, catchphrases and, often, contempt and cynicism directed at real and perceived opponents, including probing of dissenting think-tanks. In the process, there has been a growing shift away not only from concrete results, transparency and accountability but also, particularly, from meaningful understanding of the partnership and contributive roles of think-tanks for all societies and nations (Stilwell and Uzodike, 2006). Thus, think-tanks are being subjected increasingly to various forms of bureaucratic and regulatory restrictions aimed at controlling them and reducing or even stifling their critical voices for evidence-based policies and reforms.

The net effect is that government funding sources are increasingly drying up where they existed, or out of the question where they were merely being contemplated. Those realities are despite considerable national growth in government budgets over the past few decades. These challenges have been worsened by the exponential global increase in the number of think-tanks which, expectedly, have created greater competition for available resources.

**Think-tanks in a Changing Operational Environment: Planning for the Future in Africa**

Although think-tanks around the world are increasingly struggling for survival, the situation appears more serious for think-tanks in Africa, a region with some of the greatest needs for policy influence and redirection. The resulting environment of uncertainty and public frustrations has served to increase questions about the historic role and usefulness of African think-tanks. Indeed, many of them such as the African Heritage Institution (AfriHeritage) or the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), are demonstrably change drivers and protectors of the regional or public interest and conscience. The situation is further worsened due to rising demands by donor organizations for short-term and project-specific funding, accountability, and evidence of impact. In Africa, many donor agencies are so keen to maximize outputs/outcomes that they ignore organizational health and growth issues by insisting on low overheads of about 10%; and even the recipient's own contributions toward the completion of the project. Such conditions have led some analysts to raise serious questions about think-tanks and their survival. In 2010, for instance, Michael Tanji declared that think-tanks are dead as we know them: "The Think Tank is Dead: Long Live the Think Tank." Writing five years later (5 Oct. 2015) in *Washington Post*, Amanda Bennett asked very seriously: "Are Think-Tanks Obsolete?" However, writing about two weeks later (21 October, 2015) in *The National Interest*, James Jay Carafano disagreed with Bennett and Tanji but acknowledged that think-tanks must adjust to a fast changing operational environment: "Think-Tanks Aren't Going Extinct. But They Have to Evolve."

Indeed, think-tanks have never been more needed and relevant than now: a vastly more dynamic and often technologically bewildering world where many of the old rules no longer apply. As James McGann (Bennett, 2015) underscored, 'the old adage "research it and write it and policy makers will beat a path to your door," is no longer the case'. Think-tanks must either adjust to objective conditions by shifting away from traditional precepts or perish. Globally, many think-tanks face varied combinations of serious challenges: funding; independence and autonomy; quality and capacity; and impact/effectiveness (McGann et. al, December 13, 2017). These challenges are especially salient for African think-tanks that are saddled with additional issues: ineffective boards and excessive founder interferences on routine administrative matters or on-the-ground strategies despite desperate needs to tackle searing problems. Largely starved of funding, many African think-tanks' operational environments are often dire, heavily



contested, or desperate. This situation usually leaves them fragile and vulnerable as relatively weak governments plot their own survival in the face of social turmoil and increasingly outspoken, demanding, and insistent electorates. Sadly, when pressured, governments often see think-tanks as detractors or enemies rather than development partners. In fact, many African governments (including Nigeria's) are challenging the autonomy of independent non-state civil society organizations such as think-tanks. Although many think-tanks such as AfriHeritage persist with their efforts, some others align under pressure in order to avoid proscription or trumped-up charges, or in expectation of government favors. Given this array of problems, many African think-tanks are faced with strategic and operational challenges that they must redress or fail.

### **Key Strategic Challenges Facing African Think-tanks**

- 1) *New Innovations in Technology and Communications*: Faced perennially with funding and staffing challenges, many African think-tanks cannot keep up with changes in technology, communications, big data, and data visualizations. While some peers elsewhere are updating their business models, skill sets, and other innovations, many African think-tanks are typically either in survival modes or deeply entangled in low-reward projects and, thus, unable to engage emerging developments, opportunities, and threats. There are also serious issues around how they should adjust to highly intense and desirable technological innovations which require training and deeper pockets. Consequently, they often lack the competitive edge or capacity necessary for quick distilling reactions and impactful responses to emerging issues and developments. For AfriHeritage and many other African think-tanks, bridging efforts for such gaps typically depend on savings from consultancies as well as careful planning and difficult choices (where possible).
- 2) **Emergent Competition**: As with their global peers, African think-tanks are faced with vastly changed operational and competitive environments in which other organizations – YouTube, advocacy groups, financial organizations, social media, public relations firms, bloggers, Google, news platform and networks, etc. – have transformed and accelerated news analyses and information delivery cycles so profoundly that they are often faced with packaging and disseminating comparatively stale documents and



assessments of critical issues. In a world of smartphones and news-and-analysis-as-it-happens, traditional research and publishing processes are increasingly outdated, slow, bulky, tedious, and unwelcome by information-loaded policymakers and the general public who prefer summaries and soundbites. So, instead of the near-dominance of the ideas industry previously enjoyed by think-tanks, they are now compelled to subsist within a saturated environment where different and more innovative competitors often hold sway. One analyst aptly underscored that the ideas merchants are ‘struggling to be heard’ (Bennett, 2015). For a growing number of African think-tanks, this has meant reducing or eliminating hard-copy based publications and gravitating towards on-line newsletters, e-books, e-journals and e-libraries.

- 3) **Think-Tank Strategy and Structure:** Faced with global, rapid, and profound changes in their operational environments, many think-tanks have been slow to change their operational structures and strategies with respect to their business models, focal points, and delivery arrangements. Indeed, AfriHeritage and other African think-tanks often struggle with appropriate adjustments and traction due to their arrays of challenges, especially their routinized inability to retain qualified staff with cutting-edge training and skills. Often, this is despite years of training and investments in staff development. For instance, labouring over the years to nurture many of its staff towards higher degree qualifications, AfriHeritage’s lack of strong career paths for mid-level staff, and its demonstrably weak benefits structure and lower salaries for many staff combine to render it comparatively uncompetitive vis-à-vis universities, and international organizations and aid agencies.
- 4) **Impact of Changing Political Environment:** Besides being ignored or neglected in many countries, some African think-tanks face stifling, politically-motivated, regulatory and internal administrative policy instruments by governments (including Nigeria’s) with the view to: limit think-tank independence and control their abilities to challenge government policy failures and service delivery issues; and defuse or weaken opposition political parties. Arguably, these pushbacks from government are net outcomes of the changed Western political environments of resurgent conservative political parties and governments, which have relaxed previous pressures on human rights-abusing governments. This new environment has weakened the work and



capacity of think-tanks as proponents for evidence-informed policymaking and transformative change. Hence, with the exception (arguably) of a few countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Rwanda, and Kenya, most independent think-tanks in Africa are largely marginal in the calculations, activities, and policy formulation processes of governments and political organizations. This harsher operational environment has forced AfriHeritage and many other African think-tanks to look for ways to collaborate more effectively, at least with respect to addressing the existential threats facing them domestically. Alive to the political nature of the threats, many think-tanks have not only refused to be intimidated, but also have remained adamant on prioritizing their operational mandates.

- 5) **Impact of Funding Options and Environment:** Funding is the lifeblood of think-tanks. Indeed, no organization can thrive or stay healthy without adequate and sustained financial resources. Funding has direct implications not only for research work and programming, but also for rental and administrative costs, human resources, and staff development. Unfortunately, most African governments do not have dedicated budgets for independent think-tanks. As such, many think-tanks must rely on external funding and consultancies to keep afloat. The sources, types, and duration of funding are hugely important for think-tanks, especially in Africa. For instance, the innovative IDRC-TTI model with its renewable 5-year awards was particularly good for grantees such as AfriHeritage and the Institute of Economic Affairs in Ghana. This was because it enabled them to operate more credibly as think-tanks. While there were a few hitches and challenges over the 10-year support received by most grantees, it made a marked difference for grantees with respect not only to research quality, advocacy, and impact, but also on planning, staff capacity-building and higher degree qualifications, and the all-important matter of improved organizational performance through institution-building. This contrasts sharply with other grants, which are typically rare and short-term, and standard funding arrangements that tend to be one-off, short-term, and project based. The latter often entails institutional overhead of about 10%, which means that organizations are constantly cash-strapped, short-term and project-focussed, and consistently expending scarce intellectual resources on proposal preparations. Long term support is important for think-tanks generally. For African think-tanks, such



support is indispensable not only for organizational effectiveness, but also for institutionalization and long-term sustainability. TTI support was especially helpful for AfriHeritage because it enabled the organization to leverage some of its resources more creatively for complimentary activities.

- 6) **Think-Tank Value Addition:** Think-Tanks are not just storage banks for ideas; they are change-drivers in all societies. By canvassing for evidence-informed discussions and policymaking, think-tanks are catalysts for transformative change and development. Their value additions rest particularly in their ability to reframe or set agendas through policy evidence and innovations by mobilizing subject experts, incubating and sharing ideas, and driving policy issues. Sadly, many African think-tanks are often unable to play those critical roles as effectively and consistently as peers elsewhere. The often complex reasons include: inadequate trust of think-tanks due to suspicion that they may be stooges used instrumentally by local political rivals for political sabotage; that foreign government interests may be using local think-tanks to remove the sitting government for hegemonic reasons or in pursuit of foreign national interests; that there is a need to limit the probing eyes and questioning tendencies of think-tanks and other organizations that may ask problematic questions about accountability and transparency on government activities, which are best kept as internal matters; and that government ministries and departments have numerous policy experts with the capacity to handle policy issues effectively. Many African think-tanks operate in hostile environments where their mere existence may pose significant problems for dishonest officials and policymakers; hence, their tension-riven relationships, and the associated government efforts to control think-tank activities.

## Conclusion

Without a doubt, think-tanks are genuine instruments for transformative change around the world. This is no different for African think-tanks, which continue to perform at relatively high levels despite working in comparatively hostile operational environments. They are often denied support funding, access to information and key officials and, often, independence and autonomy. While some African think-tanks are spared some of those challenges, many others have had to deal with such or even worse challenges. For me, those challenges do reflect considerably my own experiences since joining AfriHeritage in August of 2016. Yet, the



organization and many of its peers in Africa persevere and persist through hard work and incredible sacrifices. Hence, there is a need to reflect thoughtfully and methodically on how best to manage and steer African think-tanks away from harm's way and towards sustainability and a more contributive outlook and effectiveness for Africa's continued economic, political, and social transformation.



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