



THE AFRICAN CAPACITY BUILDING FOUNDATION

Creation, Management
and Sustainability of

THINK TANKS IN AFRICA



Creation, Management
and Sustainability of

THINK

TANKS IN

AFRICA

First published in October 2025 by the African Capacity Building Foundation

Copyright © The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF)

ISBN:978 -1-77928-632-1

EAN: 9781779286321

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as expressly permitted by law, without the prior, written permission of the publisher.

The African Capacity Building Foundation

2 Fairbairn Drive, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) does not guarantee the precision of the data included in this work. The boundaries, colors, and other information shown on any map in this work do not imply any judgment on the part of the Foundation concerning the legal status of any territory or the endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this volume do not necessarily reflect the views of the ACBF Executive Board or Board of Governors.

For additional information on our knowledge products, projects, and program operations, as well as other ACBF activities, please visit our website www.theacbf.org or write to root@acbf-pact.org

This book is an initiative undertaken under the Africa Think Tank Network (ATTN) housed at ACBF. The Hewlett Foundation supported the publication of the Book. ATTN is a platform for information sharing, exchange of ideas, knowledge creation and dissemination, and creating partnerships among think tanks to individually and collectively develop evidence-based solutions to the pressing development challenges facing Africa. For more information about ATTN and other initiatives, visit: www.theacbf.org

Contents

List of Figures, Tables and Boxes	v
Foreword	1
Preface	4
Acknowledgments	7
Acronyms	10
Executive Summary	17
Chapter 1. Think Tanks in Africa: Urgency and Opportunity	20
Ideas in the policy discourse	20
<i>A proven track record in catalyzing development</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Think tanks in Africa: history.....</i>	<i>24</i>
Evidence-based role and importance of think tanks in the society	26
<i>Policy research and analysis</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Fostering policy dialogue</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Capacity building.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Knowledge management</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Collaboration and networking</i>	<i>36</i>
Focus of the book: reflections and experiences	38
<i>New reality: Is Africa really rising?.....</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>Synthesis of the reflections</i>	<i>41</i>
Chapter 2. Creation of Think Tanks in Africa: Why and How?	44
Determining factors in the evolution of think tanks in Africa	44
<i>Determinants of think tanks' development globally.....</i>	<i>44</i>
<i>Factors shaping the evolution of think tanks in Africa</i>	<i>45</i>

Challenges think tanks face in contemporary Africa	48
<i>Inadequate legal framework</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Funding issues</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Capacity shortages</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>Participation in international networks</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>Lack of policy uptake</i>	<i>54</i>
How to create a think tank in Africa: a practical guide	55
Conclusion and recommendations.....	57
 Chapter 3. Cases in the management and sustainability of think tanks in Africa.....	 59
Introduction	59
Regional Context of Think Tanks in Africa	61
<i>General Trends Across Sub-Regions</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>Key Challenges</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>63</i>
SELECTED CASE STUDIES	64
<i>Case of CERAPE</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Case of CAMERCAP</i>	<i>77</i>
<i>Case of KIPPRA</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Creation of KIPPRA</i>	<i>85</i>
<i>Case of ESRF</i>	<i>100</i>
<i>Case of ZEPARI</i>	<i>114</i>
Cross-Case Patterns.....	127
<i>Governance and Leadership</i>	<i>127</i>
<i>Funding and Resource Mobilization</i>	<i>127</i>
<i>Human and Institutional Capacity</i>	<i>128</i>
<i>Policy Influence and Uptake</i>	<i>129</i>
<i>Networks and Partnerships</i>	<i>129</i>
Emerging Trends	130
<i>The Digital Turn and the Rise of Artificial Intelligence</i>	<i>130</i>
<i>Continental Integration and the AfCFTA Moment</i>	<i>131</i>
<i>The Demographic Dividend and Youth Inclusion</i>	<i>131</i>

<i>Shifts in the Donor Landscape and the Rise of Domestic Philanthropy</i>	132
<i>The Return of the State and the Demand for Evidence</i>	132
<i>Knowledge Pluralism and the Public Sphere</i>	133
Policy Implications and Recommendations	133
Chapter 4. Building lasting institutions with the right capacity	137
Introduction	137
ACBF's framework for assessing the capacity challenges faced by think tanks	139
<i>General overview and background</i>	139
<i>The ACBF framework</i>	141
Current challenges related to the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks	145
<i>Most pressing Challenges identified by the study</i>	145
<i>Working towards sustainability</i>	158
Conclusion and recommendations	160
Chapter 5. Knowledge supply and demand, or the financial conundrum	162
Growing demand for problem-solving knowledge	162
<i>The contextual factors shaping demand</i>	163
<i>What do policymakers and funders want?</i>	166
<i>How do African think tanks assess their impact?</i>	168
Lessons from financial support to African think tanks	171
<i>Investment dynamics</i>	171
<i>Major support initiatives</i>	173
<i>What have we learned?</i>	177
Conclusion and recommendations	190
<i>Engaging the New Millennium</i>	190
<i>Strategies for tackling a changing environment</i>	192
Chapter 6. A changing landscape: the effects of digitalization on African think tanks	196

Introduction	196
<i>Recent trends in digitalization in Africa</i>	<i>197</i>
How does digitalization transform research processes?	204
<i>Access to data and digital tools brings new information to light.....</i>	<i>204</i>
<i>Remote collaboration and digital platforms change the way</i> <i>research teams and networks operate</i>	<i>207</i>
Opportunities in communication, outreach, and policy influence.....	209
Organizational change and capacity challenges	211
Recommendations for think tanks to leverage digitalization effectively.....	216
Conclusion	219
Chapter 7. The road ahead	223
Key messages and lessons learnt	224
<i>Creation of effective think tanks.....</i>	<i>224</i>
<i>Management of effective think tanks</i>	<i>226</i>
<i>Sustainability of think tanks</i>	<i>227</i>
Recommendations and policy actions	228
<i>Creation of effective think tanks.....</i>	<i>229</i>
<i>Management of think tanks.....</i>	<i>230</i>
<i>Sustainability of think tanks</i>	<i>230</i>
References.....	233

List of Figures, Tables and Boxes

Figures

Figure 1. Africa's slow-down in economic growth	39
Figure 2 Number of CERAPE researchers selected at international research workshops (2003-2024)	71
Figure 3. ACBF OCA framework: the ten organizational functions and their components	144
Figure 4. Results of the think tank assessment under CADAST	146
Figure 5. Individuals in SSA using the internet	198

Tables

Table 1. List of ACBF-supported Think Tanks by type	47
Table 2. Financing of KIPPRA's Activities for the last Seven (7) Years.....	95
Table 3. Key elements for the sustainability of think tanks	159

Boxes

Box 1. Policy dialogue for government uptake in Tanzania.....	32
Box 2. Knowledge management at the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF)	36
Box 3. Networking at the Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI)	37
Box 4. How to start or create a think tank?	56
Box 5. CAMERCAP-PARC's Strategic Plan	81
Box 6. The example of Ghana.....	201
Box 7. Example of how public debate initiated by a think tank can shape policy	210
Box 8. Digital skills in South Africa	214

Foreword

Leaders, policy-makers, and development experts have often been worrying about how to properly design well-intentioned policies as well as, and more importantly, implement and monitor them to deliver results aimed at improving the lives of their communities and countries. Think tanks have been proposed as part of the solutions as they play a critical role in supporting development agendas through their contribution to evidence policy design, implementation and monitoring of programs based on their research and analysis; their capacity building activities for state and non-state actors; and their provision of platforms for stakeholder engagement and dialogue and advocacy.

Nowhere is the need for such support and the role of think tanks greater than in Africa today. African countries are implementing Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), all aimed to achieve set goals and targets by an agreed timeline. Given the experience of think tanks in conducting evidenced-based policymaking, as well as their potential role in supporting the monitoring and evaluating progress made toward achieving the objectives of both Agendas, their importance needs to be understood and appreciated. This role has become even more critical in light of Africa's new realities: the urgency of climate action, the digital transformation reshaping governance and economies, the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, the continent's youthful and growing population, and the drive toward fiscal sovereignty and reduced dependence on external aid. I therefore commend the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) for preparing this welcome book, which is unique and a first of its kind in the context of African countries. It looks at think tanks as strategic institutions critical for the socio-economic transformation of African countries and identifies good practices from the continent. It also underscores their capacity to act as innovation hubs that connect governments, academia,

civil society, and the private sector, thereby translating research into actionable solutions. We now have rich, full, and systematic evidence on the importance of think tanks and their contributions to African countries' development.

In this Book, there are specific case studies on how to manage and ensure the sustainability of think tanks in an African context. Executives of think tanks have provided us with tips to help advance our knowledge of these very important institutions. The richness and diversity of the case studies reported here are unmatched in the existing literature in Africa, making the book a first reference and an important addition to our understanding of think tank on the continent. These stories also highlight how think tanks have demonstrated resilience — whether by diversifying funding models, leveraging digital knowledge platforms, or building regional networks that strengthen Africa's collective voice in global policy debates.

The publication of this Book arrives at a pivotal moment, coinciding with the African Union (AU) Commission's initiation of the Africa Think Tank Platform (ATTP) Project in partnership with ACBF and AUDA-NEPAD. This strategic endeavor highlights the increasing acknowledgment of think tanks as essential catalysts for informed policy development and implementation across the continent, rendering this volume both timely and indispensable. Indeed, at a time when Africa must accelerate the implementation of continental frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), climate resilience strategies, and digital economy reforms, think tanks offer the intellectual infrastructure required to bridge the gap between policy ambition and concrete results.

One consistent message is evident throughout the Book. It is the importance of using African think tanks to provide solutions to Africa's development challenges. However, for these institutions to better and effectively play their role, an important recommendation is to institutionalize the support to think tanks through the provision of political and financial support as well as conducive environment. This includes rethinking

sustainable financing models, embedding think tanks in national development planning processes, and ensuring their voices are systematically integrated into national, regional, and continental policy dialogues.

The Book will be invaluable to African policymakers, development partners, and supporters as they craft action plans to advance the transformation of our economies. It aims to sustain the notable economic growth we have experienced, creating jobs and improving the lives of more Africans. By offering insights into strengthening accountability, fostering inclusive governance, and ensuring that growth benefits all citizens, it addresses Africa's challenges and emphasizes the importance of African ownership in shaping our destiny. I am confident that this remarkable project, which deserves our heartfelt congratulations, will serve as a crucial reference for anyone invested in Africa's future.

H.E. Selma Malika Haddadi

Deputy Chairperson

The African Union Commission

Preface

“Until the lion has his or her own storyteller, the hunter will always have the best part of the story” says an African proverb. The creation of this book reflects a strategic choice and aims to directly give the opportunity to leaders, executives, and practitioners in the African think tank community to share their own experience. Literature on think tanks in Africa has always been dominated by non-Africans with little or no experience or exposure to the African context. This Book represents the Voice of the think tankers and their supporters. We wanted the real people involved with think-tanking (from creation, support, to management) to write their stories as only they could.

The book tackles current issues in the development agenda of African countries and the critical role of think tanks – which are increasingly recognized as indispensable actors in the policy process but whose contributions remain insufficiently understood. Think tanks are critical institutions that contribute to economic transformation by, for instance, supporting the formation of human capital and initiating or driving the required economic transformation; providing personnel for institution-building in the various entities supporting the change; and promoting the mobility of different groups, which entails the production and dissemination of knowledge and ideas, exerting influence upon and providing critique. In recent years, their role has expanded to include navigating new realities such as the digital revolution, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, Africa’s demographic transition, and the continent’s push for fiscal sovereignty and reduced reliance on external aid.

The book is unique and the first written by an institution that has been creating, supporting, and working with think tanks. It pays attention exclusively to African think tanks and their role in the socio-economic transformation of the continent while

sharing a wealth of experience and lessons on how to create, manage, and sustain these institutions. The production of this Book is the result of several capacity development initiatives and programs implemented by ACBF to support effective policy design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation in Africa. Recognized as the African Union Specialized Agency for Capacity Development and known as the creator and supporter of many think tanks in Africa, with over 40 established across the continent, it is obvious and natural that the production and publication of such a Book came from ACBF.

Think tank managers, supporters, observers/followers, and creators have provided the whole arc of their stories, starting with the origin and rationale of creating these institutions in the context of African countries. Equally important, the contributors explain how their own institutions have evolved, survived/sustained, and contributed to providing solutions to the realities of our countries, while sharing in the results as well as the lessons learned along the way. These testimonies also show how African think tanks have adapted with resilience to changing contexts—whether by embracing digital knowledge platforms, building cross-border partnerships, or rethinking sustainability models in response to shifting donor landscapes.

We strongly believed that this Book would be the most informative and powerful way to ensure that our readers could understand think tanks in the African context, as well as have some ideas on how to support and/or work with these important institutions. It is our hope that the amazing stories written with passion and based on real-life experiences and examples can help to better appreciate the contribution made by think tanks and their potential in supporting the successful implementation of continental, regional, and national development agendas. This includes their contributions to Africa's Agenda 2063, the Sustainable Development Goals, and national visions of transformation.

It is also our hope that think tanks managers in Africa and beyond will find the practices, lessons, examples and experiences presented in this book to be both inspirational and instrumental in tackling new challenges in their respective regions and areas. Above all, this Book is a call to recognize, value, and sustain Africa's own storytellers — its think tanks — as catalysts for bridging the gap between ideas and implementation, between aspiration and action.

Mr. Mamadou Biteye

Executive Secretary,

The African Capacity Building Foundation

Acknowledgments

This Book was prepared by a team at the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) under the overall leadership of Mamadou Biteye, Executive Secretary, with the guidance and supervision of Abdrahmane Dicko, Director of Programs and Impact, and Barassou Diawara, Senior Knowledge Management Expert, who served as project lead, principal initiator, and drafter of the first version.

The book benefited greatly from the review and technical updates provided by the Technopolis Africa team, including Francie Sadeski (Managing Partner, Senior Consultant), Andrea Stemler (Senior Consultant), Yasmine Koné (Analyst), and Marsha Gomez (Economist). We are grateful to the Technopolis Africa team for updating and finalizing the zero draft and bringing methodological rigor, fresh analysis, and global comparative perspectives, as well as conducting additional interviews and consultations.

We are especially grateful to colleagues who have worked on this project over the years, both former and current staff of ACBF. Their contributions, dedication, and institutional memory were instrumental in shaping the direction of this work. In particular, we acknowledge Roger Atindehou (former Director of Operations, retired), Bakary Kone (Special Advisor to the Executive Secretary), Grand Mutondo (Information Management Associate), Edem Messa-Gavo (Senior Impact Measurement Officer), and Fatou Diouf (Head of Communication and Influencing) for their support and valuable inputs at different stages of this project. We also wish to thank Dr. Patrick Ndzana Olomo (Acting Director of Economic Development, Integration and Trade at the African Union Commission) and Dr. Nkosana Moyo (Founder of the Mandela Institute for Development Studies (MINDS), South

Africa) for their valuable contributions during the consultation process.

We are very thankful to the institutions and individuals who have taken the time to work on this very important exercise, which consists of documenting and sharing their tacit and explicit knowledge for the benefit of Africa and those interested in Africa's development. We gratefully acknowledge the intellectual contributions of distinguished colleagues and partners across Africa's think tank ecosystem, whose work and reflections informed many of the case studies and analyses: Prof. Jean-Christophe Bounboua Bazika, Research Professor, Marien Ngouabi University and Director of Center for Studies and Research on Economic Analysis and Policies (CERAPE); Dr. Gibson Chigumira, Executive Director, Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Institute (ZEPARI); Dr. Eldah Onsomu, Acting Executive Director, Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA); Prof. Fortunata Songora Makene, Executive Director, Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF); Mr. Barnabé Okouda, Director of Coordination, International Cooperation and Research at the National Institute of Statistics of Cameroon and Executive Director of the Cameroon Policy Analysis and Research Center (CAMERCAP); and Dr. Peter da Costa (1960–2019), a long-time partner and advisor whose legacy continues to inspire. An earlier draft of the Book benefited from the valuable contributions of Dr. Dickson Khainga (then-Acting Executive Director of KIPPRA) and Dr. Tausi Kida (former Executive Director of ESRF).

A book like this does not come from the minds and hearts of just one or a few people. It grows over many years. It is the result of concrete experiences, successes, and errors of professional debate and the gradual connection of, and interaction between, various strands of work. In shaping this book, we, the co-editors, have called on many people and institutions in our personal histories, which we wish to recognize and acknowledge.

We acknowledge the contribution and review of ACBF-supported knowledge networks, namely the Policy Institutes Committee and the Strategic Studies Group as well as participants in the various Africa Think Tank Summits organized by the African Capacity Building Foundation. We are thankful to far too many people to name all of them here.

We would like to extend our gratitude to the many actors and practitioners who live and grapple with the ambitions and dilemmas described in this volume. Special thanks go to all ACBF staff and ACBF-supported projects and programs who have contributed in one way or another to the production and publication of this book. Key among the partners is the World Bank Group, which has long been a key partner to ACBF in strengthening think tanks. A Special thanks to the Hewlett Foundation for contributing to the production of this Book.

Acronyms

ACBF	African Capacity Building Foundation
ACED	African Center for Equitable Development
ACET	African Centre for Economic Transformation
ACR	Africa Capacity Report
ACSS	African Centre for Strategic Studies
ADI	African Development Institute
AERC	African Economic Research Consortium
AfCFTA	African Continental Free Trade Area
AFD	French Development Agency
AfDB	African Development Bank
AFIDEP	African Institute for Development Policy
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AMC	Advance Market Commitment
ARRF	African Regional Research Fund
ASDS	Agriculture Sector Development Strategy
ATTN	Africa Think Tank Network
ATTP	Africa Think Tank Platform
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
AUDA-NEPAD	African Union Development Agency – New Partnership for Africa’s Development
AUF	Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie
BETA	Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda
BIDPA	Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CADAST	Capacity Development for Africa’s Structural Transformation

CADERDT	Centre Autonome d'Etudes et de Renforcement des Capacités pour le Développement au Togo
CAMERCAP	Cameroon Policy Analysis and Research Center
CAPEC	Cellule d'Analyse de Politique Economique du CIRES
CAPED	Cellule d'Analyse et de Prospective en Développement
CAPES	Centre d'Analyses des Politiques Economiques et Sociales
CAPOD	Centre d'Analyse des Politiques de Développement
CAR	Central African Republic
CDC	Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention
CDRs	Call Detail Records
CEEG	Centro de Estudos de Economia e de Gestão
CEMAC	Central African Economic and Monetary Community
CEPA	Centre for Policy Analysis
CEPEC	Cellule d'Etude de Politique Economique
CEPOD	Centre d'Etudes de Politiques pour le Développement
CEPSI	Centre d'Etudes des Problèmes Sociaux Indigènes
CERAPE	Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Analyses et Politiques Economiques
CERCAP	Centre d'Etudes et de Renforcement des capacités d'Analyse et de Plaidoyer
CETO	County Economic Transformation Outlook
CIAD	Centro de Investigação, Análises de Políticas para o Desenvolvimento
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIPESA	Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa
CIRAD	Centre for International Development
CIRES	Centre Ivoirien de Recherches Économiques et Sociales
CMAF	Centre Mauritanien d'Analyse de Politiques
CODESRIA	Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa
CREAM	Cercle de Réflexion des Économistes de Madagascar
CRES	Consortium pour la Recherche Économique et Sociale

DIAR	Diversity and Inclusion Awards & Recognition
DoE	Department of Economics
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
ECCAS/CEEAC	Economic Community of Central African States/ Communauté Économique des États de l'Afrique Centrale
ECDPM	European Centre for Development and Policy Management
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EDRI	Ethiopian Development Research Institute
EEA/EEPRI	Ethiopian Economics Association/Ethiopian Economic Policy Research Institute
EMH	Economic Modeling Hub
EPAU	ECOWAS Economic Policy Analysis Unit
EPM	Economy Policy Management
EPRC	Economic Policy Research Centre
EPRI	Economic Policy Research Institute
ESRF	Economic and Social Research Foundation
ESSENCE	Enhancing Support for Strengthening the Effectiveness of National Capacity Efforts
EU	European Union
FANRPAN	Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAUEFAO	Forum pour l'Autonomisation Economique de Femmes en Afrique de l'Ouest
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FYDP	Five-Year Development Plans
GAH	Governance Action Hub
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEPARI	Ghana Economic Policy Analysis and Research Institute
GIZ	Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

GRTD	Global Research and Technology Development
GSMA	Global System for Mobile Communications Association
HESPI	Horn Economic and Social Policy Institute
HIID	Harvard Institute for International Development
HLG-PCCB	High-Level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for the 2030 Agenda
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IAEG-SDG	Inter-Agencies and Experts Group on Sustainable Development Indicators
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IDEC	Institut de Developement Économique du Burundi
IDEG	Institute for Democratic Governance
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IEA	Institute for Economic Affairs
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IFDD	Institut de la Francophonie pour le Développement Durable
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
ILO	International Labour Office
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organization
IPA	Institute of Policy Analysis
IPAR	Institute for Policy Analysis and Research
ISS	Institute for Security Studies
KARC	KIPPRA Annual Regional Conference
KICTANet	Kenya Information, Communication and Technology Action Network
KIPPRA	Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis
KPPR	KIPPRA Public Policy Repository
KRA	Kenya Revenue Authority
KTMM	KIPPRA-Treasury Macro Model
KYP	KIPPRA Young Professionals
LDCs	Least Developed Countries

LIMPAC	Liberia Macroeconomic Policy Analysis Center
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MDPI	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute
MEL	Monitoring, evaluation and learning
MELP	Ministerial Executive Leadership Programme
MINDS	Mandela Institute for Development Studies
MINEPAT	Ministère de l'Économie, de la Planification et de l'Aménagement du Territoire
MMC	Máxima Medisch Centrum
MoFP	Ministry of Finance and Planning
MPPRAP	Malawi Public Program Research Analysis Project
MSC	Most Significant Change
MTEF	Medium Term Expenditure Framework
MWG	Macro Working Group
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NCEMA	National Centre for Economic Management and Administration
NEPRU	Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit
NGO	Non-governmental organizations
NILDS	National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies
NILS	National Institute of Legislative Studies
NSGRP	National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty
OCA	Organizational Capacity Assessment
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OTT	On Think Tank
PEP	Partnership for Economic Policy
PIC	Policy Institute Committee
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RCC	Research Commissioning Centre
RCTs	Rigorous impact evaluation

RED	Research and Evidence Directorate
REDESO	Relied to Development Society
REPOA	Research on Poverty Alleviation
RITA	Registration, Insolvency, and Trusteeship Agency
S4YE	Solutions for Youth Employment
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SAGA	Semi Autonomous Government Agency
SARIPS	Southern African Research and Innovation Partnerships
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SEAPREN	Southern and Eastern Africa Policy Research Network
SEPARC	Eswatini Economic Policy Analysis and Research Centre
SERA	Strategic Economic Research and Analysis
SISERA	Secretariat for Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SND	Stratégie Nationale de Développement – National Development Strategy
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
STI	Science, Technology and Innovation
STISA-2024	Science, Technology, and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024
STPC	Strategic Transformation and Policy Centre
TAKNET	Tanzania Knowledge Network
TAP	Think Africa Partnership
TAPNETs	Technical Advisory Panels and Networks
TAWAH	Tanzania Women Architects for Humanity
TBI	Tony Blair Institute
TDV	Tanzania Development Vision
TPU	Tax Policy Unit
TRF	Thomson Reuters Foundation
TTI	Think Tank Initiative
TVETs	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

UAPS	Union for the African Population Study
UKCDR	United Kingdom Collaborative Development Research
UN	United Nations
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference for Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECA	United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNSD	United Nations Statistical Division
USAID	US Agency for International Development
WAEMU	West African Economic and Monetary Union
WB	World Bank
WECAPREN	West and Central Africa Policy Research Network (ROCAPE)
WHO	World Health Organization
WSP	Women and Social Protection
WTO	World Trade Organization
ZEDCON	Zimbabwe Economic Development Conference
ZEPA RI	Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Institute
ZEPARU	Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit

Executive Summary

Think tanks have emerged as indispensable actors in Africa's policy and development landscape, bridging the space between research, governance, and society. They produce evidence-based analysis, inform decision-making, and nurture dialogue on the continent's most pressing challenges, from economic transformation and industrialization to governance reforms and social inclusion. Yet, their survival and effectiveness are constantly tested by fragile funding, political pressures, and limited institutional capacity. This book, *Creation, Management and Sustainability of Think Tanks in Africa*, provides a deep exploration of how African think tanks are created, how they operate, and what strategies are needed to ensure their long-term sustainability.

The book begins by situating African think tanks in a historical context. It shows how they emerged in the post-independence era, often supported by external partners or linked to universities and governments, before gradually diversifying into more independent or hybrid forms. By comparing different models across the continent—government-affiliated, university-based, independent, and hybrid—the book explains how institutional origins shape autonomy, credibility, and effectiveness. It further examines how African political and economic contexts, often marked by fragility and dependence on external financing, affect the development and operation of think tanks.

A central theme running throughout the book is the unevenness of Africa's think tank landscape. While Southern, Eastern, and Western Africa have seen the emergence of relatively strong and visible think tanks, such as KIPPRA in Kenya, ESRF in Tanzania, BIDPA in Botswana, and SAIIA in South Africa, Central Africa lags behind. There, institutions like CERAPE in Congo struggle for recognition, resources, and influence, reflecting

broader structural constraints in fragile political and economic environments. The book underscores that these disparities not only limit the regional balance of policy voices but also weaken Africa's collective ability to contribute to global debates on development.

Despite these challenges, the book highlights important opportunities that can transform the role of think tanks in Africa. The continent's long-term vision, as expressed in Agenda 2063 and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, places knowledge and evidence at the center of policy reform and implementation. The African Continental Free Trade Area and ongoing regional integration create demand for research and policy dialogue on trade, taxation, industrialization, and finance. Africa's growing youth population represents a reservoir of talent for research and innovation, while AI and digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for knowledge sharing and collaboration.

Sustainability remains the critical concern, and the book examines strategies that can ensure think tanks not only survive but thrive. These include building stronger institutional foundations, diversifying funding sources beyond donor dependence, cultivating domestic support through partnerships with governments and the private sector, and adopting innovative financing approaches such as endowments and service-based models. The book also stresses the need for improved governance within think tanks, greater investment in human capacity, and stronger regional and international networks to amplify their voice and influence.

Through rich case studies and comparative analysis, the book shows that think tanks can only achieve sustainability by embedding themselves in Africa's development ecosystem—producing knowledge that is relevant, trusted, and demanded by policymakers and citizens alike. It calls upon African governments, the private sector, and development partners to treat think tanks as strategic assets for governance and development, while also

challenging think tanks to strengthen their credibility, capacity, and resilience.

In sum, this book makes the case that sustainable think tanks are not simply academic institutions, but crucial instruments for Africa's transformation. By offering lessons, strategies, and a roadmap for action, it positions African think tanks as central to building a future where policies are shaped by evidence, institutions are strengthened by knowledge, and development is driven from within the continent.

Chapter 1. Think Tanks in Africa: Urgency and Opportunity

“One withstands the invasion of armies; one does not withstand the invasion of ideas” –Victor Hugo (1877)

Ideas in the policy discourse

Ideas have been recognized in the economic development literature and policy discourse as integral to the development and outcomes of public policies. However, to influence policy making and, hence, policy outcomes, ideas need to be well shaped, communicated, and channeled. In other words, ideas need carriers if they are to exert any influence on policy outcomes. In recent years, think tanks have been key actors in the policy process and projectors or carriers of policy ideas worldwide.

Think tanks are independent organizations producing research-based evidence to address policy issues and seeking to inform and influence the policy making processes through various engagement strategies¹. They are increasingly seen as influential players in shaping development policy and practice.

1 According to the Cambridge dictionary, a think tank is “a group of experts brought together, usually by a government, to develop ideas on a particular subject and to make suggestions for action”

Although think tanks are not necessarily new in the policy arena, there has been exponential growth in such institutions in the developing world. Nowadays, think tanks are playing a key role in addressing Africa's manifold challenges which obviously necessitate the generation of context-sensitive and/or nationally relevant knowledge and capacities to inform long-term innovative and robust policy decisions around interacting issues (ACBF, AUC, ECA & NEPAD, 2016; Mbadlanyana, 2024; OTT, 2024a; OTT, 2024b; African Leadership Magazine, 2024).

This introductory chapter—and the book, in general—considers the critical factors that contribute to the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks in Africa. It builds on the case studies of African think tanks and the experiences of practitioners and experts in the field.

A proven track record in catalyzing development

The 2024 On Think Tanks State of the Sector Report indicates that the United States continues to host the largest number of think tanks globally, although its share of new think tank creation has declined in recent years. As of the latest estimates, Europe now surpasses the US in total think tank numbers, with more diversified growth across regions, including Asia and Africa. In sub-Saharan Africa, think tank development has accelerated, with more institutions emerging in countries like Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya. While the United States had over 2,000 think tanks by 2020, growth has since plateaued, whereas other regions are seeing more dynamic trends in establishment and influence (OTT, 2024, pp. 14–15).

The unprecedented economic growth in the past two decades in Asia is proportional to the growth of think tanks. This is hardly a coincidence. Think tanks are recognized as centers of excellence as they can devote the necessary focus, time, resources, and expertise to specific issues of generating policy ideas based on unbiased and proven evidence, leaving behind the use of political

set-ups that may be biased to the ideology and may not have the full attention to gather the evidence it deserves.

Establishing the European Union (EU) has been one of the most challenging policy tasks in history. Creating a framework to which all potential EU members agree with complex and diverse political, cultural, economic, and social backgrounds, remains challenging. Among the most visible and effective private players contributing to the EU policy discussion are the think tanks (Demes, 2009). Many think-tanks receive a large share of their funding from research-commissioning EU bodies, but private corporations are also important financiers (Pautz and Plehwe, 2014; Rasmussen, Anne, and Panke, Diana, 2016). Some operate on a country specific basis, others have regional outreach, and the rest deal with European and international issues. Their ability to analyze and articulate the message attracted and satisfied the voracious demand from the media for such material and hence helped influence the campaign towards regional integration. Throughout the formulation process and thereafter, the demand by the EU and member countries for consultancy and advisory services of the think tanks has been relentless. Think tanks are still indispensable in shaping EU policies through evaluation, analysis, and research today.

The 2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report indicates that the United States of America (USA) has the highest number of Think Tanks globally, reaching 2,203 in 2020, against 2,932 in the whole of Europe and 679 in sub-Saharan Africa. The number of think tanks in the US has more than doubled since 1980. American think tanks conduct research and policy analysis across every major domain (foreign policy, defense, economy, health, education, and climate). Their outputs (briefs, white papers, op-eds, testimony, etc.) help shape congressional debates, regulatory decisions, and executive branch strategy. For example, the Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute are often cited in congressional hearings and White House briefing materials. Think tanks essentially function as the shadow ministries of government (McGann, 2007). They also play an

important role in shaping public understanding of complex issues through op-eds in national outlets, podcasts, newsletters, and hosting panels and town halls on critical issues. They often have an ideological leaning which helps them secure funding from private and public actors.

The leading institutions in most categories are overwhelmingly from the USA, forcing global rankings of best think tanks to have two categories (excluding and including the USA). Among the first 30 “Top” think tanks worldwide, 10 or one third are from the USA. American Presidents and Senators are not the only ones listening to those think tanks; global and national leaders of other countries also do. No other think tank has global influence beyond its country of establishment like those in the USA. People, from political leaders to ordinary citizens, refer to and cite the results of research analysis from American think tanks such as the Brookings Institution and the Heritage Foundation. They are influential on questions ranging from global issues such as climate change, terrorism, and human rights to domestic issues covering local political debate (for instance, health reforms, education, and power). This broader focus on their research and analysis contributed to the USA’s economic, military, and political power over the world.

De Boer (2015) gave examples of ideas that had a major impact globally. For instance, the Marshall Plan of rebuilding Europe after World War II was developed from concrete recommendations proposed by Leo Pasvolsky – a Brookings Institution expert – and his team. In a more contemporary example, the Advance Market Commitment (AMC) mechanism for vaccines (originally proposed by a Center for Global Development working group in 2005) has continued to evolve in importance. According to a 2020 NBER working paper by Kremer, Levin, and Snyder, the pilot AMC launched in 2009 mobilized roughly US \$1.5 billion in donor pledges for pneumococcal vaccine deployment in low-income countries. CGD’s 2020 policy analysis further places AMCs in broader immunization and pandemic response contexts, noting that AMC-style mechanisms remain central to

financing strategies – including proposals during the COVID19 response.

Think tanks in Africa: history

In Africa, the importance and role of think tanks in the development process is not new in that think tanks have been central to some countries' evolving geo-political and socio-economic development. In fact, some think tanks pre-date independence. For example, the *Centre d'Etudes des Problèmes Sociaux Indigènes* (CEPSI) was established at Elizabethville (now Lumumbashi, DRC) in 1946; the African Institute of Social Research (Makerere, Uganda) in 1948; and the West African Institute for Social Science (Ibadan, Nigeria) in 1950 (Duignan & Gann, 1974; Kimenyi & Datta, 2011). The oldest African think tank is probably the South African Institute of International Affairs, founded in Cape Town in 1934 by a group of academics, politicians and newspaper editors (Versi, 2016). The recent wave of think tanks, however, reflects a changing policy landscape. Relatedly, the import and focus of think tanks have evolved with time, as the scope and activities of these institutions have expanded in response to the changing macro-economic and geo-political environment.

During the colonial era, policy decisions in French colonies were made by the central government in France or its representatives without consultation with African elites who, by and large, have received basic education. The decision-making process was then highly centralized and uniform in French territories. Contrary to the French system, British policy was characterized by the indirect rule principle, whereby power was given to local chiefs as far as routine administrative matters were concerned. However, key policy decisions were made in London without meaningful contributions from the local elite. At that time, policy research institutes (such as the first botanical research station created in 1893 and the West African Institute for Social and Economic Research, established in 1950 in Nigeria) were set up by French

and British with a vested interest to inform policy decisions with the view to improve their lives in the colonies and to facilitate the production of commodities or extraction of raw materials for exports to the mainland.

In the early years after the 1960s independence wave, the group of elites who contributed to liberation also provided intellectual input to policy makers through research units established within universities and line ministries. Unfortunately, the contribution by elites did not last long. As the post-independence single-party regimes became repressive, there was little space for elites to contribute to policy formulation. Rasheed (1994; p. 99) confirmed that *“While a number of social scientists continued to produce research that was relevant to policy making purposes, such efforts have often been willfully ignored. Where research has produced divergent views, it has usually been considered as subversive. Evidence has also indicated that even when solicited by governments, the rate of adoption of recommendations made by social scientists was dismal.”* The lack of recognition by governments of research work and policy advice made by African intellectuals has led some of them to work with civil society, mostly funded by foreign research institutes or NGOs.

The ‘big man’ politics dominated the space until regime changes occurred in most countries through military coups. Persecutions of elites and researchers, suspension of the constitution, and dissolving national parliaments are measures taken by most military regimes that were equally authoritarian, leaving no space for the contribution of researchers to public policymaking, leading to brain drain.

The 1970s and 1980s were characterized by the influence of development aid and global financial players on the African public policy decisions. Bilateral aid agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) introduced neo-liberal reforms through structural adjustment programs in response to the economic recession experienced by many African countries. Financial aid or loans

came with conditionalities, and policy analysis and formulation were led by donor agencies and international institutions. Again, in most African countries, policy decisions were mostly dictated from outside in collaboration without meaningful input from national technocrats and officers based in the Presidency Offices, Ministries, and Central Banks.

During the post-structural adjustment period and the political and economic liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s, the landscape of think tanks in sub-Saharan Africa was considerably transformed. The number of think tanks has significantly increased due to increased donor funding and a higher demand for African-grown policies (Ngugi, 2021). The 2024 On Think Tanks State of the Sector Report (2024c) shows that 96% of surveyed African think tanks regularly produce policy briefs and research documents, 89% host public events, and 75% leverage social media. Over 64% reported dedicating substantial resources to intervening in policy processes, and 71% provide advisory services to governments and communities.

Evidence-based role and importance of think tanks in the society

Simply defined, transformation is the rapid economic growth driven by enhancement in productivity, technological capability, economic diversification, and international competitiveness that, in turn, fosters job creation and shared prosperity.

Think tanks stimulate economic transformation by, among other changes, paying attention to human capital formation and initiating or driving the required economic transformations. Moreover, the role of think tanks in political change can be assessed through the different stages of the transformation by either “removing the old”, or “building the new” systems while providing personnel for institution-building in the various entities supporting the change – civil societies, private sector, development partners,

and academia. Besides, think tanks contribute to the change in social and cultural structure, which represents the basis of social stratification, by promoting the mobility of different groups through the production and dissemination of knowledge and ideas, exerting influence upon policymakers, and providing critique. In addition, their cultural role is equally important in the sense that think tanks represent both a route for the entry of external ideas and experiences into otherwise closed societies and a repository for national sentiments that could come out of ‘storage’ when time and circumstance permitted.

Not only are think tanks known to present their persuasive and influential ideas for policy formulation, but they also have compelling evidence on the major impact they have made in changing the development arena at global, regional, and national levels. Think tanks have been the major source of ideas through creating and catalyzing discussions that resulted in brilliant ideas that changed how we do things, which otherwise would not have happened had we followed the traditional approach. The experience from Western Europe, North America, and later Asia points to the role of well-researched evidence in developing effective policies that, in turn, lead to astounding, sometimes miraculous, economic progress.

Policy research and analysis

African countries have always been grappling with different challenges dictated by their specific contexts. Challenges common to many countries include questions such as effective macroeconomic management, structural reformulation, youth unemployment, natural resource management, promotion of green growth, commercialization of agricultural products, regional integration, globalization and international trade, aid management, etc. Research is needed to inform decision making, on one hand, and create awareness among the policy makers and the public at large on possible solutions to the challenges facing society, on the other hand. Furthermore, there are a number

of global and regional protocols that take precedence over the national policies, which all require effective assessment within the context of the country. All this depends on effective analysis and design of policies and the research that underpins it. The primary objective of the think tanks is, therefore, to conduct in-depth research and analysis on the subject in question and provide the necessary evidence and policy recommendations to decision makers.

There is growing evidence of a widening “performance gap” between the official policy intentions and outcomes; policy implementation and achievement of stated targets (Wambe, 2025). Effective economic management depends on the availability of sound, objective, well-researched policy alternatives to make policy choices. The absence of an appropriate institutional framework for channeling available skills into policy analysis has been translated into a lack of institutional capacity of governments to respond quickly and decisively to rapidly changing domestic and international economic environments (Ohemeng, 2025). The establishment of think tanks helped ease this policy formulation constraint in many African countries.

The use of think tanks goes beyond the country or region in which they are working. Many development partners use the policy research and analysis products of think tanks in specific areas they are interested in, either to strategize their development support or achieve political space. Even though they still use their own think tanks, their major source of information is the local think tanks, for these have an in-depth contextual understanding.

More recent assessments continue to highlight the essential role of African think tanks in policy ecosystems. A 2024 review of Sub-Saharan think tanks underscores their evolving contributions to public policy and societal debate, despite persisting structural and financial challenges (On Think Tanks, 2024a; Mbadlanyana, 2024).

The 2013 ACBF evaluation of think tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa provides a framework for analyzing the importance of think tanks in fostering evidence-based research, policy and analysis. The findings show that think tanks (1) address critical policy issues; (2) actively participate in policy discourse; and (3) produce quality research products and services (ACBF, 2013).

Address critical policy issues. Recent research and stakeholder feedback confirm that African think tanks continue to play a decisive role in addressing pressing and emerging policy challenges. These institutions act as both watchdogs and partners to governments, generating rigorous, evidence-based analysis that guides decision-makers through increasingly complex governance landscapes (OTT, 2024b; Mbadlanyana, 2024).

Many think tanks now go beyond traditional research outputs to engage in strategic foresight, scenario planning, and participatory consultations that include civil society and marginalized groups. This evolution reflects a shift in focus from reactive to anticipatory policy support, helping governments and regional institutions adapt to rapid economic, social, and environmental changes.

For instance, the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) in Ghana has expanded its scope from promoting peaceful electoral processes to supporting democratic consolidation, social accountability, and civic education. IDEG has positioned itself as a strategic partner to both government institutions and grassroots organizations, offering policy briefs and public dialogues on decentralization, constitutional reform, and youth political engagement.

In Nigeria, the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (NILDS) continues to play a central role in shaping legislative frameworks at both national and regional levels. Beyond its long-standing work with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), NILDS has provided targeted research on public financial management, oversight mechanisms, and gender-sensitive budgeting. Its recent initiatives have

included partnerships with universities and international donors to develop leadership programs aimed at emerging legislators across West Africa.

These examples illustrate how African think tanks are not only responding to government demand but actively shaping the policy agenda through independent analysis, strategic alliances, and advocacy rooted in local contexts. They demonstrate an increasing ability to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy, helping ensure that reform efforts are both evidence-based and socially grounded.

Actively participate in policy discourse. Think tanks are often invited to participate in, or lead, high-level policy debates and consultations. The Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) has notably been tasked with critical national research, such as assessing the impact of competition in Kenya’s mobile voice market on the telecommunications sector and macroeconomic performance. Likewise, the Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis (BIDPA) has led reviews of major national policies, including the Financial Assistance Policy and the Rural Development Policy, driving reforms that promote inclusive development (ACBF, 2013; African Leadership Magazine, 2024).

Produce quality products and services. Recent data demonstrates that African think tanks consistently deliver high-quality products and services, reinforcing the effectiveness of capacity-building interventions. According to the 2024 State of the Sector Report by On Think Tanks, 96% of surveyed Sub-Saharan African think tanks produce policy briefs and other research documents, 89% organize public events and conferences, and 71% offer advisory or consulting services—all indicators of robust quality and stakeholder engagement. Moreover, 89% of these think tanks reported involvement in formal policymaking channels, and 85% contributed directly to public policy over the past five years—highlighting their strong reputation and consistent relevance in shaping policy debates.

These figures align with ACBF's earlier 2013 survey, where 89% of stakeholders rated supported think tanks' outputs as "above average" or "excellent". The persistent high performance demonstrates sustained credibility despite ongoing funding and capacity challenges. (ACBF, 2013; On Think Tanks, 2024c)

Fostering policy dialogue

Think tanks are also known for creating various platforms to offer individual citizens, civil society organizations, academic and research institutions, the media, and the private sector the opportunity to share their opinions on the review of existing policies or the formulation of new ones. Especially in countries where democratization is at an infant stage and where the trust between the public and government is eroded, think tanks played the role of linking the public at large to the government. Think tanks in this respect are known to promote free flow of information through the involvement of various stakeholders in research activities, thereby promoting participation of the public in decision-making processes. Think tanks help bridge the gap between public policy makers and the voice from the grassroots level through policy dialogue and forums.

When many countries in Africa developed the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers in late 1999 and early 2000, it was mainly think tanks and civil societies that created the forums to gather citizens' sentiments and supported the process of coming up with a strategy, which Governments claim was developed through a participatory process.

In addition, think tanks periodically organize workshops, annual research conferences, and seminars to disseminate research findings and the results of their policy analysis work to all stakeholders, including the government. This also serves as public education on policy matters, engages stakeholders in policy debates that enhance their appreciation of the nature of the research findings that underpin policy decisions. It also

facilitates an easier absorption of research outputs as inputs into policymaking. The case of ESRF in Tanzania is illustrated in Box 1

Box 1. Policy dialogue for government uptake in Tanzania

Established in 1992, the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) was an answer to the need for the development of institutional capacity for policy analysis in the country. A key component of its activities is the organization of policy dialogue. Participation in policy reviews, policy discussion workshops and policy dialogues has been the most popular activity of ESRF. Amongst highly rated results of ESRF in terms of policy review are the Tanzania Development Vision 2025, Development Vision 2020 for Zanzibar Islands, the 2022 policy dialogues on Tanzania's Five-Year Development Plan III, its contributions to national digital economy policy discussions, and its 2023 dialogues on agro-industrialization and youth employment, all underpinned by serious and in-depth policy dialogues. ESRF conducted a total of 29 policy dialogue sessions between 2021 and 2023. The results of the dialogues were subsequently disseminated through media coverage and press releases, and publications such as policy dialogue briefs. (ESRF Annual Report 2021-2023)

The Institute for Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR-Rwanda) has also played a critical role in the amendment of Rwanda's tax code through rigorous policy analysis and publications, and dissemination and policy discourse – initiated the campaign to amend the tax investment code. Moreover, the *Cellule d'Analyse de Politique Economique du CIRES* (CAPEC) has greatly influenced the cocoa sector in Côte d'Ivoire by conducting studies on (i) the “Structure of the Coffee and Cocoa domestic market and producer prices” and (ii) the “Dynamics of earnings

from coffee and cocoa in Côte d'Ivoire" and advocating for the implementation of the key recommendations (Malan, 2009; Esso, 2009). Thereafter, has been implemented with a focus on the following key areas: (i) enhancing good governance and transparency in sector management; (ii) ensuring the sustainability of the sector while proactively addressing potential issues and challenges; (iii) securing and improving the income of producers; and (iv) establishing a robust inter-professional framework. In addition, the Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI) played a significant role in developing the case for a commodities exchange through: (i) rigorous policy analysis and publications (Gabre-Madhin & Goggin, 2005), and dissemination and policy discourse. Dissemination and policy discourse were used to garner support for the need for the Ethiopian Commodities Exchange (ACBF, 2013). In Côte d'Ivoire, CAPEC/CIRES has continued its longstanding influence by advising government policy on cocoa. During its 30th anniversary in October 2024, Côte d'Ivoire's Vice-President publicly praised CAPEC's crucial contributions to sector governance, including studies on cocoa market structure and producer incomes that later informed reforms enhancing transparency, producer earnings, and establishing a more robust interprofessional body for the sector (CAPEC 2024).

The various think tanks are utilizing different tactics for policy influence. Policy dialogues and workshops appear to be utilized extensively and have had some impact on policy reform. However, an ACBF survey showed that policy discussions and roundtables are often insufficient. As such, some institutions are moving toward advocacy tools such as television and radio to inform, educate, and galvanize the citizenry on critical public policy issues. Finally, institutions such as KIPPRA have used their visibility and credibility to garner support on key issues, thereby influencing policy decisions and promoting sustainable development in Kenya (ACBF, 2013).

Capacity building

The capacity building initiatives of think tanks for bringing evidence into policy need to go beyond technical research to include participative methods of creating evidence, building alliances for better influence on policy, and training the various stakeholders involved in decision-making. Long term capacity building initiatives are crucial for think tanks to allow inclusivity, ownership, and measurable impact of the various national, regional, and continental policies, with special attention to “learning by doing”. Capacity building, therefore, addresses complex, multi-faceted problems requiring the participation of various actors, organizations, and institutions. It encompasses institutional development but goes beyond individual organizations and institutions to cover broader systems, groups of organizations, and inter-organizational networks.

Because of the wealth of knowledge and experience on policy research, analysis, and formulation, key stakeholders acknowledge think tanks as instrumental in capacity building for public policy analysis. Often, government ministries lack institutionalized capacity building for applied economic research and policy analysis, which undermines effective coordination and dialogue on key economic policy issues. There is a consensus that rigorous economic policy analysis should be paired with policymakers capable of interpreting research outputs and turning them into policies. Think tanks are well placed to provide capacity building on policy analysis and formulation, as they possess the expertise.

The beneficiaries of capacity development programs cut across a broad spectrum of stakeholders – public, NGO community, civil society, and private sector organizations. The proposed programs usually go beyond conventional training and aim at enhancing both the strength of institutions and that of their employees. The approaches commonly used by think tanks include research interns and young researchers who work within the institution for some time; joint research and short-term assignments pursued together with public servants; work attachments provided for

both junior and senior researchers; hosting visiting scholars; and running short courses and seminars.

Knowledge management

The publications produced by the think tanks were, for some time, considered scientific papers full of equations that only appeared in Journals and were primarily used by other researchers. However, as the need for accessible knowledge grew, these organizations began to adapt their outputs to reach a broader audience, focusing on practical insights that inform policy and public discourse. Recognizing that this was an obstacle to a wider reach, think tanks undertook the production of simplified policy briefs that can easily be understood by ordinary citizens and their representatives in Parliaments. In addition to being demand-driven, these are made available for stakeholders through hard-copy or virtual libraries. Think tanks also created knowledge networks – as is the case for the Tanzania Knowledge Network (TAKNET) – supported by ACBF to provide opportunities to professionals to network, share, and exchange experiences and knowledge (see Box 2).

Box 2. Knowledge management at the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF)

Recognizing the critical role of ICT and knowledge management as key drivers of development, ESRF has integrated Knowledge Management as a key component of its strategy. Knowledge management is a process of creating, acquiring, capturing, sharing, transferring, and using knowledge to enhance learning and performance in organizations. Beneficiaries of ESRF's knowledge management services have not only been ESRF researchers and other internal staff, but also a broad range of policy analysis stakeholders. In this regard, ESRF has been managing the Tanzania Development Gateway – an internet portal that provides online networking with about 6,000 visits per day – and Tanzania Online – a gateway to information on development issues with more than 32,000 visits per day. The think tank is also hosting the TAKNET – a forum that provides opportunities to professionals to network, share, and exchange experiences and knowledge with about 500 registered members.

Collaboration and networking

Think tanks also serve as platforms for networking among individuals and institutions with an interest and stake in the policy making process, including government, private sector, or civil society organizations (see Box 3 for the case of the Ethiopian Development Research Institute). Especially, regional think tanks have played this role in bring like-minded institutions in the region and created relations with those in other regions globally.

Box 3. Networking at the Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI)

Founded in 1999, EDRI was established mainly to respond to the technical support needed by policy makers based on a rigorous technical analysis before taking decisions on long-and short-term government policies in areas ranging from domestic economic policies to international trade and investment. As part of its strategic activities, EDRI conducts outreach and networking for policy impact and ownership. A strong activity under networking is collaborative research. EDRI does its networking through seminars, workshops, and conferences. Various Annual Reports from 2009-2011 indicated that EDRI staff participated in several seminars, workshops, conferences and short-term training all of which enhanced their research and analytical skills. In the technical short courses, EDRI staff delivered the training either by themselves or jointly with other research and development agencies. For instance, in 2009, 2010 and 2011, there were 37, 43 and 34 of such events respectively. The total number of participants in these events exceeded 450 with high caliber participants – such as Cabinet ministers, senior policy makers, ambassadors, representatives of multilateral and bilateral development agencies, heads of international organizations, members of parliament, researchers from other agencies, NGOs, and the media.

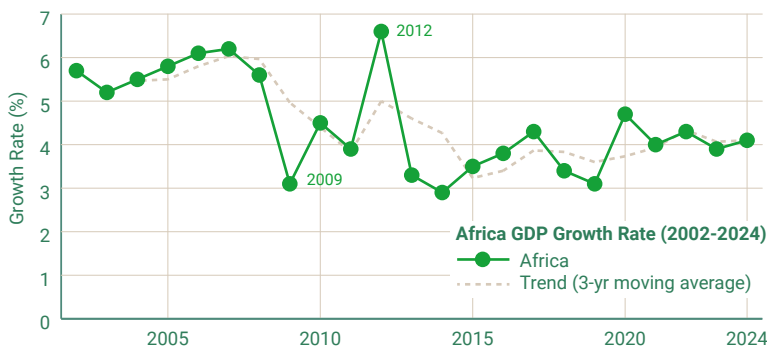
In November 2018, the Ethiopian Government merged the Ethiopian Development Research Institute and the Policy Study and Research Center (PSRC) to establish the Policy Studies Institute (PSI).

Focus of the book: reflections and experiences

New reality: Is Africa really rising?

Africa achieved impressive economic growth over the past 15 years, with average real GDP rising from just above 2 percent during the 1980s–1990s to over 5 percent between 2001 and 2014 (AfDB, OECD & UNDP, 2016). In that same span, the “Africa rising” narrative was underpinned not only by growth but by the emergence and expansion of a middle class, rising labor productivity, increased trade, and foreign direct investment (FDI), and enhanced political and macroeconomic stability – all noted in earlier analyses (ACBF, 2015). More recently, average GDP growth in Sub-Saharan Africa decelerated from approximately 4.6 percent in 2014 to about 3.8 percent in 2025, equivalent to a compound annual decline of roughly –0.9 percent per year (IMF, 2024; UNDP/IMF, 2025). FDI inflows also rebounded sharply, with US \$97 billion in 2024, a 75 percent increase from 2023, making up around 6 percent of global FDI (UNCTAD, 2025). Meanwhile, the continent’s middle class now encompasses over one-third of its population (some 310 million people), as confirmed by the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2024).

Figure 1. Africa's slow-down in economic growth



Source: Based on AfDB, 2024; IMF, 2024; WB, 2024; UNECA, 2023

A combination of both internal and external factors explains such a decrease (Figure 1). Though a slowdown in major trading partners and the tightening of borrowing conditions are considered as important external factors, the low commodity prices represent one of the most important factors explaining the slow-down of economic activities in Africa in recent years (IMF, 2025). Moreover, the large natural resource potentialities remain largely untapped while, at the same time, the continent is facing significant challenges including youth unemployment, inequality, insecurity, infrastructure deficits, low regional integration, weak governance and leadership, and climate change adaptation and mitigation.

Therefore, for the transformation of African economies to become a reality, evidence-based policies need to be defined, implemented, monitored and evaluated. This requires creating and building the capacity of the institutions tasked with such responsibilities, so they can effectively deliver on their mandates.

In realizing the need to support governments with evidence-based planning, the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF)

has over the past 30 years been developing and supporting think tanks across the continent. These think tanks have been central in supporting governments with policy analysis and technical advice around the development priorities in their countries of operation. With the implementation of Agenda 2063 and the SDGs starting in earnest, the role of think tanks in ensuring that these agendas are domesticated in national development plans and that countries have the capacity to implement them cannot be overemphasized.

Notwithstanding the key role of these institutions in Africa's development process, their recognition and visibility remain wanting. Most think tanks in Africa still contend with weak institutional arrangements, weak administration and management, inadequate capacity to influence or shape policies, and, more importantly, a lack of diversified funding sources, compromising their autonomy and sustainability. It is in light of the foregoing that ACBF, building on its leadership in supporting think tanks across the continent and the expertise of seasoned African specialists with experience working with think tanks, undertook the production of knowledge products that will fill the gap around the role, importance, work, management, impact, and sustainability of think tanks in Africa.

The production of this book also comes as a result of many requests addressed to ACBF seeking technical advice on how to create and manage think tanks in different contexts in Africa. The book is unique and the very first contribution of an institution supporting and creating these institutions to the academic and policy literature on issues related to think tanks in the context of African countries. Moreover, it will be of great use to the think tanks community, academia (including students), policymakers, development specialists, and the various stakeholders that see value in evidence-based development planning and implementation on the continent. The book aims to fill the knowledge and literature gaps on think tanks in Africa. The purpose is to make the case for having effective think tanks that promote evidence-based policy

making in Africa by understanding not only how to create them but also how they can best be managed and sustained.

Synthesis of the reflections

This Book synthesizes reflections and experiences specific to Africa's contexts on the importance and relevance of think tanks on the continent, mainly paying attention to the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks. It therefore represents an authoritative and informative literature and documentation on think tanks in Africa, drawing mainly from the experience of experts, rich and first-hand materials, and case studies from the think tanks, as well as the institutions supporting their work.

Creation. This chapter is mainly based on the experience of ACBF, recognized as the premier institution in creating, developing, and supporting think tanks in Africa. ACBF has supported more than 60 think tanks, which have become key drivers of policy discourse and debates, as well as reliable conduits or sources of technical and advisory support to stakeholders along the policy value chain in the various countries. Moreover, the patient capital model adopted by ACBF has enabled the establishment and grooming of think tanks in extremely capacity-deficient contexts and regions with limited policy research analysis and management capabilities. Contributors highlight the principles and rationale underlying the creation and support of think tanks in Africa, present in detail the process of creating and supporting think tanks in the region, and share the lessons learnt on the best way to create and support think tanks on the continent.

Management. Chapters, and contributions dealing with the management of think tanks are based on the experience of African think tanks and experts working on and with these institutions, paying attention to the lessons learnt in terms of successfully and effectively managing think tanks on the continent. Practitioners, mainly executives of selected think tanks, present and analyze the

factors that have been instrumental in the effective management of think tanks in Africa. In the various chapters, the contributors also discuss the potential challenges to be tackled for effectively managing think tanks in the region. Equally important, the contributors provide detailed information, for learning purposes, on what works, what doesn't work, and why, using the case of their own think tanks as well as some illustrations within and/or beyond the region. The chapters also dwell on the human, institutional, and societal capacities required to successfully manage think tanks in Africa.

Capacity issues. Capacity being at the center of development challenges in Africa, Chapter 4 pays special attention to the required capacities for effectively creating, managing, and sustaining think tanks in Africa. In this chapter, the contributors provide suggestions on the key human, soft, and societal and institutional capacities necessary for the effective creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks on the continent.

Sustainability. Chapters focusing on the sustainability-related issues mainly showcase some of the best emerging (and worst) practices and strategies used by the African think tanks to ensure their financial and non-financial sustainability, enhance their capacities, and achieve influence and impact. Illustrations from non-African think tanks are provided in order for African think tanks to learn from, given that think tanks in other parts of the world have been more successful in ensuring their sustainability. Moreover, the role and experience of supporting institutions such as the African Capacity Building Foundation is also featured to document the role capacity building institutions, development partners, and other stakeholders – government, private sector, and civil society – should play to help think tanks ensure their sustainability.

Digitalization. A dedicated chapter deals with the topic of digitalization which changes the landscape of think tanks as much as any other organization. It provides a number of challenges, some of them related to capacity, and others to the legal framework

of the way institutions collaborate. Digitalization, on the other hand, also brings opportunities for think tanks to communicate with the general public and influence opinion on different levels.

Chapter 2. Creation of Think Tanks in Africa: Why and How?

“We must treat think tanks as knowledge infrastructure. Current laws do not.” – ACBF, 2023 Africa Think Tank Summit Report.

Determining factors in the evolution of think tanks in Africa

Determinants of think tanks’ development globally

Much of the literature on the development of think tanks concentrated on think tanks in Europe and the USA. One can understand this fact in the sense that most think tanks are created and operated in Western countries, especially in the USA, where think tanks enjoy a conducive environment for their operations and development. The **political system, institutional setting, and the decision-making system, as well as the philanthropy culture**, are critical factors that have contributed to the development and sustainability of think tanks in the U.S.A. and to some extent in Europe.

The institutional architecture is not the same in Africa and it is obvious that the evolution and development of think tanks in the U.S.A. are hardly comparable to those in Africa. This was confirmed by the comparative analyses of think tanks performed

by Stone (2005), Weaver (1989), and McGann and Weaver (2000) who concluded that there is “no one best model or trajectory for think tank development” and the “U.S. experience with think tanks may not be readily transferable to other settings”. However, some common factors have been identified in the literature as elements impacting the evolution and influence of think tanks. For example, McGann and Weaver (2000, p. 13) note that the “structure and operations of political institutions are clearly a critical determinant of the level of activity and type of think tanks in a given country.” The number of think tanks and their influence are high in U.S.A. probably because of the peculiarity of the American political system (Weaver, 1989). Other factors such as **financial support, legal structures, the intensity of political debate, civil society development, and the tax environment** could also shape the operating landscape of think tanks.

“All difficulties of African think tanks come from the fact that public decision makers do not understand the utility of opinions different from theirs and how it can help them refine their thinking.” – Dr. Nkosana Moyo, Mandela Institute for Development Studies, South Africa [interviewed in 2025].

Factors shaping the evolution of think tanks in Africa

In recent years, literature on the evolution and development of think tanks in Africa has expanded. In 2023, the Nkafu Policy Institute found that the main factors conducive to a flourishing think tank landscape are (1) building trust and long-lasting working relationships with government enables uptake of policy proposals; (2) a lengthy track record and robust internal controls (like financial systems) provide credibility with donors; and (3) cross-national exchange and joint agenda-setting with peer networks raise visibility and collective impact (Nkafu, 2023). In 2024, the Brenthurst Foundation analyzed sector development patterns and found that pluralistic environments facilitate diverse think tank ecosystems, while challenges remain

in attracting experienced researchers, sustaining funding, and professionalizing internal structures. In Africa, many think tanks face threats to autonomy and resource stability, affecting longevity and influence. The On Think Tanks State of the Sector Report 2024 surveyed nearly 300 think tanks from 95 countries, identified four factors determining institutional resilience and policy influence: (1) Think tanks with stable core funding (rather than solely project-based grants) tend to be more sustainable and less influenceable. (2) The degree of democracy, political polarization, and government openness significantly influences a think tank's ability to conduct research and engage with policymakers. (3) Operational maturity and capacity (including staff size, specialist skills, and leadership experience) correlate with sustainability. (4) The think tank's visibility via media presence, social media, and public events augments the perceived impact.

The establishment of ACBF in 1991 has contributed to the proliferation of think tanks in the region. The Foundation has been mandated to improve the policy-making process in many countries as part of achieving its mission to build strategic partnerships, extend grants, and provide technical support and access to relevant knowledge related to capacity building in Africa. As of today, ACBF has supported more than 60 national and regional think tanks, which have become the first point of call for policy research input and advice by external policy actors and key stakeholders (Table 1). Think tanks have played a critical role in shaping and contributing to the national policymaking processes.

Table 1. List of ACBF-supported Think Tanks by type

Types of thinks tanks	Characteristics	ACBF-supported Think tanks
Autonomous and Independent	Significant independence from any one interest group or donor and autonomous in its operation and funding from government.	IDEC (Burundi), EEA/EEPRI (Ethiopia), CEPA (Ghana), IDEG (Ghana), ARRF (Kenya), NCEMA (Nigeria), SARIPS (Zimbabwe), CODESRIA (Senegal), ESRF (Tanzania), FANRPAN (South Africa), HESPI (Ethiopia), MINDS (South Africa)
Quasi Independent	Autonomous from government but an interest group (i.e., unions, religious groups, etc.), donor or contracting agency provides a majority of the funding and has significant influence over operations of the think tank	IPAR-Kenya, IPAR Rwanda, ESRF (Tanzania), NILS (Nigeria)
University Affiliated	A policy research center at a university.	EPRC (Uganda), CEEG (Mozambique), CAPEC (Cote d'Ivoire)
Political Party Affiliated	Formally affiliated with a political party.	NONE
Government Affiliated	A part of the structure of government.	MPPRAP (Malawi), CAPOD (Benin), SEPARC (now ESEPARC, Eswatini), GEPARI (Ghana), LIMPAC (Liberia)
Quasi Governmental	Funded by government grants and contracts but not a part of the formal structure of government	KIPPRAP (Kenya), ZEPARU (Zimbabwe), EDRI (Ethiopia), ZIPAR (Zambia), BIDPA (Botswana), NEPRU (Namibia), STPC (Cabo Verde), CEPEC (Guinea), CREAM (Madagascar), CERCAP (Mali), CMAP (Mauritania), CAPED (Niger), EPAU (Nigeria), CIAD (São Tomé and Príncipe), CEPOD (Senegal), CADERDT (Togo), CAMERCAP (Cameroon), CAPES (Burkina Faso)

Source: Authors' compilation

Challenges think tanks face in contemporary Africa

The contemporary context (characterized by a globalized world, shifting donors' priorities, shrinking donors and government funding, etc.) raises several issues that will influence the survival of existing think tanks and the creation of new ones. The establishment and success of think tanks in the contemporary setting will depend on how best to address the challenges.

Inadequate legal framework

A lack of clear legal definitions for think tanks may result in lumping them together with NGOs, consultancies, or academic institutions. In addition to complications in the registration process, this might not only lead to a reduced ability to access grants or international partnerships, but also to extensive ministerial oversight and approval processes (Nkafu, 2023). In addition, many modern think tanks operate as “think-and-do tanks” or networks (not single legal entities). These do not fit neatly into standard laws governing civil society or business, often leading to networked models (coalitions, pan-African partnerships) lacking legal recognition. Under-regulation of intellectual property, research licensing, and data-sharing also hinders collaboration across borders and between stakeholders.

In some African countries, legal frameworks are weaponized to stifle civil society and shut down critical voices. Some governments merely require pre-clearance of publications or public events, chilling open debate. But authoritarian or hybrid regimes can intimidate staff or partners from collaborating with a think tank, apply restrictions on freedom of expression and limit policy engagement, especially on sensitive topics like governance, elections, security, or human rights. (OTT, 2024).

Restrictions or heavy monitoring of cross-border financial flows can also make external funding uneasy. Some countries (Nigeria,

Uganda) have proposed rules that force NGOs and think tanks to register with financial intelligence units, creating extra compliance burdens and suspicion. In Zimbabwe, think tanks have reported donor fatigue partly due to an unpredictable regulatory climate.

Few countries offer tax exemptions or legal incentives tailored to think tanks, research institutes, or knowledge producers. Yet, these would encourage tax-deductible donations and public-private research collaboration. In some cases, public procurement laws even prevent think tanks from competitively bidding for research or evaluation contracts. (Zimcodd, 2025)

Funding issues

Think tanks in Africa will continue facing challenges related to their long-term survival. In most cases, funding to think tanks is sporadic and project-specific, preventing them from conducting relevant and timely research. Sometimes, think tanks lose their independence due to the need to secure financial resources. The situation is not expected to evolve much, given that governments hardly consider policy products as public goods or services that need as much attention as any other public service, like education and health.

Also, the modest interest of private institutions and foundations in supporting activities or providing core funding to think tanks in Africa does not contribute to securing their long-term sustainability. Support from foundations and other philanthropic organizations has been critical in the success and sustainability of think tanks in America and Europe that enjoy permanent funding and autonomy. Although the same model might not necessarily apply to Africa, the continent needs to develop a proper funding model that better suits the development of its think tanks.

Any budget allocated to policy think tanks in Africa from the Government coffers is usually preceded by a serious debate as to why we need them, how relevant they are, and whether we can do

well without them in light of many other competing priorities for budget and the existence of public institutions and parastatals who can “do the job”. It is not uncommon to observe Parliamentarians who are given the mandate to discuss budgets consider think tanks as competitors to the Parliament itself, with claims that the latter also has the mandate to ‘think’ for the country and decide what the right policies are. The challenge of justifying the need for such institutions is much more pronounced for African think tanks relative to other regions where they have already proven their worthiness to get the attention and the budget they attract. This is especially difficult in many countries of Africa, where policy decisions are either made based on the political ideology of the governing party or ‘evidence’ from government-affiliated institutions established to justify the policies already in place.

The Think Tank Initiative (TTI), supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has played a key role in funding research organizations across Africa. However, with a decline in traditional donor funding, think tanks must now demonstrate stronger relevance and adopt more diversified resource mobilization strategies.

According to the On Think Tanks 2024 report, many African think tanks still rely heavily on short-term, project-based grants, which limit their institutional sustainability and independence. To remain effective, they must explore new funding models, including research commercialization, consultancy services, and partnerships with private and philanthropic actors.

Only about 18 percent of think tanks in low—and middle-income countries receive core funding, highlighting the urgency of building resilient and flexible financial models to support their long-term missions. Since 1991, ACBF has received support from the World Bank and other multilateral and bilateral donors, supporting more than sixty think tanks in Africa.

National governments should step up to securing core funding to think tanks, considering them as indispensable partners in the design and implementation of policy decisions. For example, core expenditures of national think tanks should be planned in the annual government budget. The cases of KIPPRA in Kenya and the then-SEPARC in Eswatini are good illustrations of governments' willingness to ensure the sustainability by providing core funding and sometimes financial support to activities planned by national think tanks. This, however, raises the question of operational autonomy. Can these institutions maintain an independent or even challenging stance towards their paymasters?

Another solution resides in establishing endowment funds that could provide long-term financial stability to Africa's think tanks and give them room to carry out their work and maintain their independence. In such a model, the core funding would derive from annual interests yielded by the endowment, and think tanks could complement their operating budget with self-generated income from services. This model provides a balance between certainty and incentive and ensures sustainability.

Capacity shortages

The capacity of think tanks to recruit and retain quality researchers is essential in providing high-level analysis and establishing a reputation. Limited or inadequate human research capacity and high turnover of researchers are constraints that think tanks should currently address to ensure effective delivery of their mandate. Many think tanks face challenges recruiting high-caliber researchers or cannot retain them for a long time. When research fellows start performing well, they are quickly hunted by international organizations operating in the country. Some national think tanks cannot afford to compete with such organizations that enjoy more resources and a conducive and motivating working environment.

In analyzing factors such as staff turnover/retention, morale, and productivity, it is essential that think tanks go beyond the compensation or performance assessment system and look at the whole array of an organization's interactions with staff (Struyk, 2006). Elements contributing to policy analysts' motivation include recognition of achievement, interesting work content, and opportunity for growth or advancement, high-priority or high-visibility assignments to be given to research fellows, as well as a competitive salary. Given the limited resources available, it is advisable that think tanks employ monetary and non-monetary rewards as a package for staff retention.

Think tanks also need leaders with vision to drive the organization beyond domestic policy arenas. Think tank leaders need to be charismatic and dynamic as well as knowledgeable of current national and global issues with a high capacity for anticipation and adaptation. The Founder's disease often strikes in African think tanks when the driving force behind their creation and development retires. This is due to the lack of a succession plan and the lack of renewal of the organization's vision.

Participation in international networks

Another challenge Africa's think tanks will continue to face is the capacity to participate in the global debate and contribute to addressing global policy issues. Globalization came with issues beyond geography that require deeper thinking and analysis.

Modern think tanks should be able to initiate evidence-based research programs that address major issues of concern between Africa and the rest of the world. There are many areas where Africa needs to have a common position. It is the role of think tanks to analyze, to provide guidance, and policy recommendations at continental, regional, and national levels. Emerging transnational social problems, such as migration and refugees, drug trafficking, security, and terrorism, urge policy research into these fields. Other issues of concern include global trade agreements,

climate change, illicit financial flows, etc. These are transnational policy problems that provide opportunities for collaborative research, information sharing, and cooperation with the aims of helping engage African think tanks with international policy communities. Think tanks could participate in the global social policy at different levels by contributing to intellectual debates and implementing social policies, or facilitating and managing networks for service delivery and policy implementation.

Think tanks in Africa lack the resources to interact with transnational policy communities. Limited access to core or flexible funding constrains capacity to attend global events, implement global visibility strategies (branding, publishing, travel, multilingual materials), commission comparative research, or produce thought leadership for global audiences. It is widely recognized that African voices in global policy networks remain limited (OTT, 2024). Thus, limited resources are channeled elsewhere, and think tanks miss out on collaboration with the very international research and think tank networks that could provide them with useful technical support.

This also means that chances to co-publish, speak on shared Global South interests, or mobilize South-South networks for stronger global visibility are scarcer. Therefore, African voices are underrepresented in international panels, op-eds, and multilateral dialogues, and marginal in international publications². African think tanks are equally underrepresented in global think tank rankings, international advisory boards, and global forums (e.g., World Economic Forum, COP policy rooms), to which participation often depends on personal network or travel funding.

2 According to *Nature Africa* magazine, “although Africa represents 18% of the world population, it only produces 1% to 2% of the global research and innovation outputs.” (Adebayo, 2023)

Lack of policy uptake

African think tanks are positioned at the center of generating locally-rooted, relevant evidence to tackle interconnected challenges (e.g., public health, trade, climate, governance). They provide endogenous knowledge capacity, enabling long-term policy innovation rather than short-term reactive solutions. Their collaborative networks and tailored policy advisory roles are increasingly recognized as pivotal in guiding decision-makers on context-specific issues.

However, African think tanks would need to be more proactive in the policy value chain, with more focus and action on policy implementation. They need to be more engaged in policy advocacy and training activities, rather than simply observing or advising on policy, to be more visible in policy delivery. In other words, think tanks should focus on how to translate policy decisions into action and become more and more “think-and-do-tanks”. A think-and-do-tank goes beyond policy advice to test and scale interventions through running pilot programs, advocacy campaigns, civic training, or co-implementing policies with government or NGOs. It operates more like an action-research hybrid or a social innovation lab.

Effective communication of results to the right audiences is just as important to a think tank’s success as producing high-quality research and policy analysis. There is no interest in conducting good policy analysis if it is only to be shelved. The challenge for most African think tanks is in how to ensure policy uptake and use of the research work. They should use diverse dissemination tools like policy briefs, workshops, events, advisory relationships and build a strong media presence, use social media more actively and create storytelling for policymakers. They should also engage more directly with policymakers to develop a trustful relationship, for instance through tailored training or internal advisory.

How to create a think tank in Africa: a practical guide

This sub-section draws mainly on the experience of ACBF, which has been recognized as having created and/or supported think tanks in Africa. It provides general practices (complemented by a brief step-by-step guideline in Box 4), with the understanding that the creation of think tanks is context- and country-specific. Capacity Needs Assessment is one of the tools used by ACBF to identify, design, and implement fit-for-purpose capacity building interventions, including the support and/or creation of think tanks.

Identification and problem-setting stage. The purpose of this stage is to make the necessary institutional and technical arrangements to facilitate the conduct of the capacity needs assessment exercise. This stage also includes the development of a concrete plan and strategies to secure early buy-in by stakeholders to ensure consensus building on the priority focus areas of the capacity assessment, the scope, the methodology, key stakeholders to be involved, the definition of the oversight role of the Task Force, the timeline for conducting the exercise and agreement on the use of the product. By the end of this stage, the needs are well known and the priority areas for interventions identified, namely the setting-up of a think tank and its focus areas.

Feasibility analysis stage. This stage consists of thoroughly examining the various components of the proposed think tanks, including drawing up plans and cost estimates. It focuses more on (i) an analysis of the political, economic and social context of the country or region and the alignment of the project strategic focus with country development priorities and strategies; (ii) definition of the think tanks' goal, specific objectives, activities and quantification of specific inputs, outputs and expected outcomes through a results measurement framework; (iii) identification of the target audience and key stakeholders including clients and beneficiaries; and (iv) estimation of the think tanks' costs, balance

between expenditures categories (program costs and institutional costs) and potential sources of financing (including government contributions, donors, own resources, etc.).

Implementation stage. This stage examines and puts in place all factors and arrangements necessary for the successful establishment of a think tank and analyzes all the variables that may affect its setting-up. It focuses mainly on putting in place sound financial management arrangements and capabilities; developing and setting the legal status and adequate organizational structure; managing the resources (material, personnel, and financial); ensuring the existence of the required technical ability, experience, and M&E system and establishing the organizational history and relations with government and other stakeholders.

Box 4. How to start or create a think tank?

The brief advice below (without any particular order) could be considered when creating a think tank. This is general guidance and needs to be customized in view of the various countries' contexts and the potential key impact area of intervention.

Define the think tank's purpose, focus and audience.

The purpose of the think tank will often come from a genuinely identified need. A market survey can refine or complement the original idea. Moreover, it is necessary to articulate how to improve or solve the identified problems (research, policy dialogue, training, etc.) while clearly articulating for whom the issues are being solved.

Find the right people, including the leadership.

Enough stakeholders should be on board who think the think tank's purpose is legitimate and are willing to devote their expertise, time, and (sometimes) resources to the project. These could include thematic experts, communication specialists, researchers, policymakers, networkers, managers, etc.

Define the approach and modalities of conducting business. *Some institutional arrangements need to be in place for the think tank to accomplish its mission. A clear customer value proposition should also be developed so that the key resources and main processes can be determined.*

Mobilize resources. *One of the most challenging aspects, the mobilization of resources goes beyond identifying corporate donors and setting fees for services. Applying for grant money can help ensuring independence and autonomy, while encouraging efficiency.*

Get advice and continue learning. *It is crucial to continuously network with the think tank community (through the Africa Think Tank Network and Africa Think Tank Summit, for instance) to ensure continuous learning and improvement.*

Source: Authors' construction

Conclusion and recommendations

The importance of Africa's think tanks in the continent's socio-economic transformation has been recognized as they play a critical role in shaping the future of the continent's policy discourse and development agenda, hence the establishment of more specialized and thematic think tanks (such as health-think tanks, education think tanks, climate think tanks, etc.). The genuine need for policy research and analysis, capacity building, policy dialogue, knowledge management, and collaboration and networking for policy impact and sustainable development has justified the creation of think tanks in the context of African countries.

While the creation of think tanks in Africa is context specific (no-one-size fits all in the setting-up of think tanks), some of the key issues to consider include the identification and definition of the problem (hence, the focus), the thorough analysis of the feasibility of the think tank, and the implementation which puts in place all arrangements necessary for the running of the institution (e.g. financial management and control systems, organizational structure and expertise). However, good practices from ACBF experience show that there is need to involve, as much as possible, all stakeholders (customers) in the pre-assessment exercises; conduct evidence-based country assessment for a deeper understanding of country contexts; assess the potential demand for policy advice; and put in place strategies for the long-term sustainability of think tanks.

The contemporary context (characterized by a globalized world, shifting of donors' priorities, shrinking of donors and government funding, development of the internet of things, etc.) raises several issues that will influence the survival of existing and the creation of new think tanks. The establishment and the success of think tanks in the contemporary setting will depend on how think tanks conduct business and deliver on their mandate in a virtually connected world (where think tanks have to market their ideas and sell their services and products over the internet).

Chapter 3. Cases in the management and sustainability of think tanks in Africa

Case studies have been drafted by the Executive Directors of the various think tanks at the time of working on this Book: Barnabé Okouda (CAMERCAP-PARC Case study; Cameroon); Fortunata Songora Makene (ESRF Case study; Tanzania); Dr Eldah Onsomu (KIPPRA Case study; Kenya); Dr. Gibson Chigumira (ZEPARI Case study; Zimbabwe); and Jean-Christophe Boungou Bazika (CERAPE Case study; Congo).

“Africa’s Think Tanks are potential incubators for leading ideas for Africa’s transformation, thus providing invaluable space for a rare form of intellectual leadership and intergenerational exchanges.” – Dr. Funmi Olonisakin, Founding Director, African Leadership Centre.

Introduction

Think tanks have become indispensable actors in Africa’s development landscape. Operating at the nexus of research, policy, and practice, they generate evidence to guide decision-making, provide independent analysis, and create platforms for dialogue among governments, civil society, and development partners. As Africa pursues ambitious frameworks such as the African Union Agenda 2063, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and the United Nations Sustainable Development

Goals (SDGs), the role of think tanks in shaping and monitoring policy processes has become increasingly important.

This chapter contributes to the growing literature on African think tanks by systematically examining their experiences through the lens of sustainability. It draws on five case studies—CERAPE in Congo, CAMERCAP in Cameroon, KIPPRA in Kenya, ESRF in Tanzania, and ZEPARI in Zimbabwe—written by the Executive Directors of these institutions. Each institution represents a different context: from fragile post-conflict settings (CERAPE) to state-affiliated research units (CAMERCAP, KIPPRA, ZEPARI), to independent foundations that balance donor dependence with national legitimacy (ESRF). Together, they provide a rich tapestry of experiences across Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa.

The purpose of the chapter is threefold. First, it showcases the diversity of African think tanks, illustrating how they navigate their specific political, economic, and institutional environments – more think tanks exist but could not be covered due to constraints such as limited time, responses, data availability, and varying levels of influence. Second, it distills the lessons learned from their efforts to survive, adapt, and remain relevant over time. Third, it generates comparative insights to inform future policy interventions by governments, development partners, and the think tanks themselves.

The chapter applies a common analytical framework that emphasizes five dimensions of sustainability: governance and leadership; funding and resource mobilization; human and institutional capacity; policy influence and uptake; and networks and partnerships. These dimensions capture both internal organizational factors and external enabling conditions. Methodologically, the chapter combines institutional case narratives from the Executives of think tanks with secondary sources such as the Africa Capacity Report (ACBF 2015; 2017), World Bank assessments (World Bank 2023), and recent analyses of the global think tank landscape (OTT 2024).

This chapter does not feature case studies from North or West Africa, despite the vibrancy of think tanks in those regions. West Africa, for instance, is home to highly influential institutions such as CODESRIA and IPAR in Senegal, ACED in Benin, NILDS and CSEA in Nigeria, and WAMI in Ghana, while North Africa hosts prominent policy research centers in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. These regions are already relatively well represented in global and regional think tank surveys (McGann 2020; OTT 2024). By contrast, the sustainability experiences of think tanks in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa remain under-documented, even though they face some of the most acute capacity and resource challenges.

The choice of cases was also shaped by pragmatic considerations. The book project was undertaken under tight time constraints, and the research relied on contributions from Executive Directors of selected think tanks. Institutions in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa responded promptly and comprehensively, whereas several potential contributors in North and West Africa were unable to provide inputs within the required timeframe. As a result, the five case studies—CERAPE in Congo, CAMERCAP-PARC in Cameroon, KIPPRA in Kenya, ESRF in Tanzania, and ZEPARI in Zimbabwe—were selected not only for their diversity of institutional models but also for the availability of detailed, first-hand documentation. Together, they provide a rich and balanced basis for analyzing the sustainability of African think tanks in challenging environments.

Regional Context of Think Tanks in Africa

The landscape of think tanks in Africa reflects the continent's diversity and complexity. While some subregions have witnessed impressive growth in the number and visibility of policy research institutions, others continue to lag behind, constrained by political fragility, weak research cultures, and limited domestic funding. Understanding these regional dynamics is essential for

appreciating both the opportunities and obstacles that shape the sustainability of African think tanks.

General Trends Across Sub-Regions

The distribution and development of think tanks across Africa's sub-regions reflect both historical legacies and contemporary political economies. Central Africa remains the weakest ecosystem, with few established institutions and limited visibility in policy debates. Despite the sub-region's vast resource wealth, research capacity is thin and fragmented, and policymakers often turn to external actors for expertise (UNDP 2017; ACBF 2017). By contrast, Eastern Africa has experienced notable growth over the past two decades, with Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda hosting influential institutions such as KIPPRA, AERC, ESRF, and EPRC. This growth is linked to democratization processes, donor investments, and the rise of demand for localized policy analysis, particularly under Kenya's devolution framework (OTT 2024). Southern Africa presents a mixed picture: South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe have long-standing institutions that play important roles in economic and social policy, yet they operate within volatile fiscal and political contexts (Gonzalez and Kritzinger 2017). Taken together, these regional patterns highlight both the uneven distribution of think tanks and the emergence of distinct institutional models—independent foundations, government-affiliated policy units, and hybrid organizations.

Key Challenges

Across regions, African think tanks confront similar sustainability challenges. The most pressing is financial fragility. Few governments allocate more than 0.3 percent of GDP to research and development, far below the African Union target of one percent (ACBF 2017). As a result, most think tanks depend on short-term donor projects that restrict their autonomy and weaken their ability to pursue long-term agendas. Political environments

also play a decisive role. In contexts where democratic traditions are weak, as in much of Francophone Central Africa, think tanks face barriers to independence and limited access to policymakers. Even in relatively open settings, political turnover and shifting priorities expose think tanks to volatility and risks of co-optation. A third persistent challenge is the weakness of networks. Many institutions operate in isolation, with limited collaboration at national or regional levels. This undermines opportunities for peer learning, joint fundraising, and collective advocacy, leaving them vulnerable to duplication of effort and marginalization in policy spaces.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, several opportunities provide grounds for optimism. Africa's demographic profile is one of its greatest assets: with more than 60 percent of the population under the age of 30, the continent has a reservoir of young talent that can be mobilized into research and policy work (Worldometers 2025). Think tanks such as CERAPE and KIPPRA have already demonstrated the potential of youth-centered training programs to refresh institutional capacity and cultivate the next generation of policy analysts. Digitalization also offers new avenues for relevance and outreach. The rapid spread of digital tools and platforms enables think tanks to access big data, experiment with artificial intelligence, and disseminate findings more widely at lower cost. Finally, continental integration frameworks such as the AfCFTA and Agenda 2063 create demand for evidence-based policy advice at regional and pan-African levels. By positioning themselves within these continental debates, African think tanks can enhance their visibility, attract funding, and strengthen their policy influence.

SELECTED CASE STUDIES

Case of CERAPE

The *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Analyses et Politiques Economiques* (CERAPE) is an independent think tank operating in a relatively difficult environment and relying mainly on its own resources. CERAPE introduced an institutional innovation by opening the doors to two types of researchers, namely the young researchers and the research trainees. Thanks to the young researchers, CERAPE has been a dynamic and innovative think tank. CERAPE since 2018 became a regional center by creating other research unities in Central African Republic (CAR) (2018), Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (2022) and Cameroon (2023). CERAPE's regionalization has strengthened and enriched its experience and helped diversify its geographic scope, which is one of the features that distinguishes it from other think tanks in Central Africa. Indeed, most of these institutions are national in nature.

This case study aims to analyze the experience of CERAPE and identify the key lessons learned for other think tanks and experts interested in Africa's development. To achieve this objective, the methodology used is based on a desk review and an analysis of the data and information in CERAPE's annual reports. Moreover, a participatory approach is also used to inform the Chapter in the sense that two workshops involving more than twenty researchers from the Center contributed to enriching its form and content.

Creation and evolution

CERAPE was established on 15 November 2002 in a context where the Republic of Congo had just emerged from the war and was in a post-conflict situation. The economic and social infrastructures destroyed by the conflict in 1997, 1998 and 1999 had to be rebuilt while displaced populations were gradually returning to their origin homes. A small group of research

professors from the Faculty of Economics took the initiative to set up a research institution to provide a framework to promote reflection on the major economic and social problems facing Congo. This reflection was to be organized and structured in a think tank using some scientific methodology meeting international standards.

The main question at the inception of CERAPE was then whether the think tank should be dependent on Marien Ngouabi University or be a fully independent research center. The decision was taken to form an independent think tank. Such decision is justified by the fact that researchers who established CERAPE did not want administrative injunctions from the university, which aims to finance research but does not have research support funds. An allowance of 50,000 FCFA (approximately USD100) was granted to lecturers and considered as a research bonus in their monthly salaries.

CERAPE also had to ensure that young researchers are integrated into international research networks, exchange their experiences and knowledge in Congo and beyond, participate in national and international workshops and seminars, acquire solid scientific knowledge, and validate and promote their research by national and international scientific committees. This approach has contributed to the dynamism and innovativeness of the think tank. CERAPE is housing many young researchers attracted by scientific knowledge. The Center continues supporting them after their Masters' Degree in competing in pan-African and international research networks by submitting their projects.

Vision and strategy

The vision of CERAPE is based on the idea that research is an activity that is primordial in a country's development strategy. Research allows to guide and enlighten this process, to set the objectives to be achieved, to define the stages, to analyze the available resources and constraints, and to ensure the realization of development plans and programs. Moreover, it helps to monitor

and evaluate the implementation of development strategies, to draw lessons, and to recommend the necessary corrections and adjustments.

Research aims at designing the most adequate institutions, the best performing universities, the most appropriate legal frameworks, and the most relevant programs and projects to improve services in areas such as education and health, transport and communication, and public services in general. It is in that line that countries establish quality university structures to develop basic and applied research.

The developmental vision has guided CERAPE since its inception. The research themes are therefore mainly designed to address issues which are at the center of economic and social development.

Organizational arrangements

CERAPE is structured by the General Assembly and Executive Management and the Research teams.

The *General Assembly* meets once a year. It brings together all the active members of CERAPE. Its role is to examine and adopt all basic texts of the Center, namely the statutes and the rules of procedure, the strategic plan, the annual report, and the program of activities as well as the budget. The General Assembly is therefore the expression of a democratic life of the think tank. Its Meetings are open and frank and give the possibility to any member to express his/her opinion and to influence the orientation of the Center, some of them were officially opened by government ministers and largely broadcasted in the media.

The *Executive Management* is responsible for applying the orientation and recommendations of the General Assembly. It is led by the Director General who represents the Center in various meetings and forums and signs the commitments made with the partners. He/she is the authorizing officer for the

budget and prepares the reports to be submitted to the General Assembly while monitoring the implementation of the daily activities of the Center. He/she is assisted by three Departments (Communication, Research, and Resource Mobilization).

The *research teams* are organized according to the projects and grants negotiated and obtained by the Center. They can include two or more researchers, depending on the scope of the study or research project. CERAPE encourages teamwork because it is often richer than individual work and promotes the exchange of knowledge and experience, and collaboration among several researchers. Such teamwork enables interns and junior researchers to strengthen their research capacities quickly and efficiently.

The question of leadership in the management of a think tank is decisive as it determines the direction taken by the institution and the results achieved. CERAPE's experience shows that leadership must be open, foster close relationships with researchers, and instill values of rigor, fairness, mutual respect, and exchange within the research community. Individual merit must be promoted because research strives for the excellence of every researcher, and cannot marry clientelism, corruption, favoritism, and mediocrity. Leadership also includes the ability to identify good researchers, empower them, build their skills, value them, and make them the pillars of the research center, while continuing to work intensively on individual and collective projects. This approach has hence helped not only to retain good researchers with remarkable team spirit within the Center but also to maintain good relationships with those who have left.

Public relations

Relationships with officials of public and private institutions (decision-makers) are of foremost importance to a think tank because they provide opportunities to influence policies and strategies. The quality of the relationships depends, however, on the quality of the work, the communication, and the organization put in place by the think tank. The relationships with decision-

makers are therefore not spontaneous or automatic but represent a real challenge requiring the design and implementation of an effective and long-term strategy by the think tank. CERAPE has ongoing relations with ministries, multilateral and bilateral institutions, private sector organizations, and civil society organizations. Indeed, leaders of these institutions have decision-making power in the economic and social fields as well as in public policies and corporate strategies. They need to be informed about the key findings and important recommendations of the studies to make sound decisions that can have a positive impact on institutions, households, and society.

Relationships with decisionmakers are maintained through the periodic transmission of newsletters, the “CERAPE Letter”, and study and research reports. These knowledge products allow to inform public administrations and other institutions of research activities. They also contribute to giving the think tank and its members a positive image in a context where research is not highly valued.

Relations with decision-makers are also reflected in the reciprocal participation in workshops and seminars organized by CERAPE or national and international institutions. Various ministries invite CERAPE as a technical partner to their workshops and seminars. Similarly, institutions such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the European Union invite CERAPE to participate in their events. This participation encourages exchanges and collaboration while being important for further capacity building interventions.

Funding

Funding is one of the major challenges Central Africa is facing in research. The relatively low funding from the Governments does not meet the requirements of a continuous quality research. The Science, Technology, and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024 (STISA-2024) highlights the need for capacity building and

expresses concerns over African governments' failure to commit at least 1 percent of GDP to R&D (ACBF, 2017) – this figure is as low as 0.3% in Central Africa.

A think tank that operates independently needs permanent funds to cover various expenses such as monthly rents, Internet connection, staff salaries, purchase and maintenance of computer equipment, acquisition of documentary resources, etc. To professionalize researchers, the think tank needs significant institutional support to ensure that they receive satisfactory remuneration based on their performance. The lack of substantial institutional support limits the professionalization of CERAPE's researchers and the publication and extensive dissemination of their work.

CERAPE's annual funding has evolved from USD 21 310 at its establishment to approximately USD 88 793 today. This increasing trend can be explained by the fact that CERAPE funding comes mainly from research and research projects, part of which resources are allocated to the operation of the Center. Given that projects vary from one year to another, long-term institutional support funding is crucial to ensure a minimum of resources for the proper functioning of the Center, though funding remains largely insufficient and uncertain.

Activities and achievements

CERAPE has contributed to research on various practical socio-economic issues faced by countries. Research themes include entrepreneurship, regional integration, economic development, poverty and vulnerability, forest management, employment, banking and microfinance, investments, fiscal policy, and growth. Research projects have often been carried out in partnership with and supported by pan-African research institutions, bilateral and multilateral cooperation organizations, Ministries, non-governmental organizations, etc.

Research has led to numerous scientific publications while positioning CERAPE as an active and effective think tank whose research findings and recommendations have inspired public policies to a certain extent. For example, Congo's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) drew heavily on CERAPE's work on poverty and related. In addition, CERAPE researchers have contributed to the publication of nearly a dozen books on entrepreneurship, economic development, regional integration, the World Trade Organization (WTO), agriculture, and microfinance.

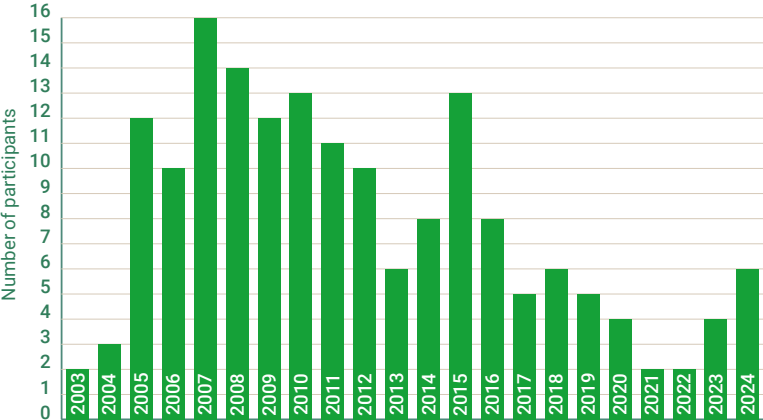
In 2021, CERAPE, due to its regional nature, carried out a major study covering six Central African countries: Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, the DRC, Chad and the CAR. The theme focused on the resilience of businesses in the face of successive crises (economic and health crises due to COVID-19). A survey was carried out among 800 SMEs in Central African countries. The study benefited from the support of the International Labour Office (ILO).

Since its creation in 2002, CERAPE has encouraged and supported its members in submitting bids and proposals to pan-African research institutions and other international organizations. The aim is to strengthen researchers' capacities and valorize their research work on a competitive basis while consolidating the culture of excellence, which needs to be developed in the Republic of Congo.

The pan-African research institutions and other international organizations include ACBF, the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) based in Nairobi (Kenya), the Council for the Development of Social Sciences Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar (Senegal), the Union for the African Population Study (UAPS) based in Accra (Ghana), the International Development Research Center (IDRC) based in Ottawa (Canada), the *Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie* (AUF) based in Paris (France), *inter alia*.

Encouraged and supported by CERAPE’s management, many senior researchers, juniors, and interns have been successful and presented quality research projects at workshops organized in Nairobi, Mombasa, Dakar, Arusha, Cairo, Abidjan, Addis Ababa, Tunis, Marrakech, Yaoundé, Lilongwe, Durban, Accra, Ouagadougou, Praia, Paris, Geneva, Quebec, etc. (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Number of CERAPE researchers selected at international research workshops (2003-2024)



Sources: CERAPE Annual Reports

Training in research is an activity of significant importance for a think tank such as CERAPE, for which most members are young researchers and research interns. The training includes research methodology, English language, and quantitative techniques. CERAPE annually organizes 6 to 10 training sessions in research methodology based on the research methodology manual developed by the Director General of CERAPE (Boungou-Bazika, 2010; 2017). This manual is the result of research activities, but also of training provided to Masters’ students and CERAPE researchers for more than 10 years. The topics covered include, among others, the selection of a research theme,

the research objectives, the literature review, the formulation of research questions, the methodological approach, the data processing and analysis, the structure of the research paper, the drafting of the research report, the references, and the evaluation criteria of a research project.

The English courses aim to ensure that the Center's researchers are fluent in this language and can access the workshops and scientific documents developed and produced in English. Depending on the available resources, 3 to 5 English language training sessions are organized annually by Congolese or foreign English teachers.

In the same vein, CERAPE organizes workshops in which researchers present their work to several researchers and receive comments, feedback, and suggestions on issues such as improving the literature review, the methodological approach, the structure of the report, the presentation on PowerPoint, etc. Before participating in a national or international conference or a public defense of theses, authors are always invited to present their work on PowerPoint during a methodological review workshop.

Research training is hands-on, focusing on integrating young researchers and interns into field surveys, data processing, and analysis. This practical experience helps them enhance their skills. Through their involvement in fieldwork, many researchers have gained a comprehensive understanding of the Republic of Congo, exploring its diversity from North to South and East to West. The training activities have helped to build the capacity of researchers while providing them with the necessary skills to submit successful project proposals in international research networks.

Lessons learnt from CERAPE's experience

The main lessons that emerged from CERAPE's experience are: (1) the need to collaborate with national institutions, dynamic national research institutions in Central African countries that are engaged in producing knowledge on national development issues;

(2) the need to provide substantial institutional support to think tanks to strengthen their capacities; (3) the need for partnerships and collaboration between think tanks and policy-makers; (4) the need to massively mobilize young people and talented women in research activities and to develop the culture of excellence based on healthy competition and emulation; and (5) the need to strengthen the sharing and exchange of knowledge and experiences within and among think tanks at national, regional and international level.

Perspectives

In 2022, on its 20th anniversary, CERAPE organized two methodological workshops to assess its activities during the period 2002-2022, i.e., 20 years. A report entitled “CERAPE 2002-2022: 20 years of experience, what lessons and perspectives?” was produced and widely disseminated nationally and internationally.

CERAPE intends to further increase research related activities. This requires the identification of national priorities in development strategies and policies, and on that basis, the pursuit of in-depth research aimed at providing evidence-based and actionable solutions to the challenges. Moreover, this also means increasing the number of researchers submitting research proposals and projects to pan-African and international institutions. The participation of CERAPE’s researchers in research activities has helped to strengthen their research capacity and the quality of their research products, validated by international scientific committees. Such activities enhance the visibility and relevance of the institution, which is therefore recognized by the national and international scientific community as a serious research center open to the world with a culture of excellence. In addition, the Center has received funding thanks to its international recognition.

Dissemination remains crucial, as without it, the activities of researchers, their research findings, and recommendations are not known and therefore cannot be considered in implementing

public policies. The dissemination of research papers, newsletters, and policy briefs (in print and web versions) needs to be continued and strengthened. Participation in workshops organized by various ministries, civil society organizations, and international institutions is also an appropriate forum to publicize the views of CERAPE researchers and disseminate its knowledge products. The quality of publications is, therefore, to be continuously improved to attract more readers and more interest from policy makers.

Training represents a fundamental function for a think tank aiming to ensure its staff members are at the leading edge of knowledge with the latest and most up-to-date methods and approaches available. The importance and necessity of training is underpinned by the fact that a researcher must constantly reinforce his/her research abilities and be updated on new concepts, theories, and methodological approaches. At CERAPE, the principle of “learning by doing” continues to be applied in training by integrating young researchers and interns into research teams, encouraging them to apply for national and international calls for proposals.

Experience gained

The experience acquired by CERAPE in managing a think tank is rich and diverse. It has spread over a period of nearly 23 years and the following characteristics: importance of membership in the research activities, remarkable dynamism of young researchers, constant thirst for training, relations with decision-makers, and integration into international and pan-African research networks.

One of the lessons learned from CERAPE’s experience is that participation in international networks helps strengthen the capacities of national researchers. Research is an activity that happens in interaction with international networks. This is only natural, as all countries have talented researchers and renowned scientists active in international networks. It is important for researchers from Central Africa to be in contact with international

bodies to be updated on the latest developments in various fields. At the same time, it is essential to expose the research findings and recommendations and have them validated in workshops and seminars involving experienced researchers from diverse backgrounds. Such participation greatly enhanced the capacity of Congolese researchers and their experience in organizing research activities and managing the think tank.

Participation in Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) activities has allowed CERAPE researchers to better understand, for example, the contribution of multidisciplinary research in economics. It has also helped to better understand the importance of general meetings as well as the design and publication of annual reports. The participation of CERAPE in AERC workshops has led to a better understanding of the role of methodological workshops and training activities in the skills development of young researchers.

Partnership remains a key component of research activities. It allows for the conduct of activities that cannot be done by a single institution. Experience has shown that partnership has often been possible with international organizations, but difficult to reach with national institutions – though the latter have the heavy responsibility to guide policies and strategies at the national level. It is therefore important to build and strengthen the partnership between think tanks and national institutions to ensure the promotion of knowledge and experience sharing and mutual collaboration.

Recommendations

Central Africa is a region with considerable potential and a bright future if these potentials are exploited mainly by Africans for Africans. Such a process requires the creation and strengthening of many quality think tanks in each of the countries. Obviously, these think tanks must be well structured and led by excellent researchers while interacting with international and pan-African research networks. Think tanks should then be able to capitalize

on the best conceptual and methodological approaches available globally by adapting them to the African and national contexts to address economic and social development challenges.

CERAPE's sustainability, dynamism, and visibility, despite its limited financial resources, can be explained by the vision set at its inception, which is to open the Center for young people and women, while ensuring their training and continuous leadership skills development. Key among the success factors is that the Center values good researchers, fosters a culture of excellence, builds continuous relationships with decision-makers, integrates national researchers into pan-African and international networks, and adheres to the vision that all economic and social development issues are to be addressed via research and evidence.

The 23 years of experience of CERAPE's activities shows the importance of think tanks for a country. These centers of reflection are crucial as they contribute to the production of scientific knowledge without which the African and national road to development would be an obscure path, without perspective and deemed to failure. It is therefore important to stimulate the creation of think tanks in each of the countries of Central Africa, as well as to support the existing think tanks, ensure partnership between them and the private sector and civil society, and promote the exchange of experiences among them. ACBF, as a main creator and supporter of think tanks in Africa, has therefore an active role to play and needs to be supported in this regard. The African Union and regional and pan-African economic institutions need also to an active part in promoting and supporting think tanks in Africa.

Finally, the regionalization of CERAPE is a very important aspect which shows that the implementation of multinational research projects brings high added value to the work carried out by researchers. The exchanges and sharing of experiences contribute to consolidating analyses and refining recommendations for improving the performance of public policies. It is therefore important to improve the structuring of CERAPE at the national

and regional levels and to stimulate the design and implementation of more regional projects.

Case of CAMERCAP

The Centre for Analysis and Research on Economic and Social Policies in Cameroon (CAMERCAP) was officially established by Decree No. 005 MINEPAT/SG/DAJ of 1 March 2013. This institutional transformation of the former project to strengthen economic and financial management capacities in the Republic of Cameroon (CAMERCAP) into a think tank was supported by a grant agreement signed between the Republic of Cameroon and the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF).

The Centre for Analysis and Research on Economic and Social Policies in Cameroon (CAMERCAP-PARC) is resolutely pursuing its mission of providing strategic support for public action in a context marked by profound structural, economic, and geopolitical changes. As a public think tank, it embodies the Cameroonian government's desire to have a forward-looking, credible, and technically competent analytical tool capable of informing political decision-making in the service of inclusive, sustainable, and sovereign growth, in line with the guidelines of the National Development Strategy 2020-2030 (SND30).

The ultimate ambition of this unit is to achieve national and international recognition based on its scientific autonomy, analytical independence, and ability to mobilize its own resources on a sustainable basis. To this end, its strong leadership alongside the Cameroonian Government, combined with a high degree of institutional ownership, is a decisive lever. CAMERCAP-PARC is thus positioning itself in 2025 at the heart of major reform projects, notably the implementation of the program budget, the import substitution strategy, and the construction of a national strategic monitoring and economic intelligence system.

Creation and evolution of CAMERCAP-PARC

The Cameroon Policy Analysis and Research Centre is the result of active cooperation between the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and the Government of the Republic of Cameroon. Initially established in 2004, the structure was created as a *project to strengthen Cameroon's economic and financial management capacities* (CAMERCAP), with the aim of supporting the Government of the Cameroon in its efforts to modernize the administration and strengthen the capacities of management personnel in charge of formulating and implementing economic policy. This involved providing various equipment and materials (vehicles, IT equipment and reprographic equipment), funding seminars and workshops, awarding training grants and internships, and financing a number of projects relating to institutional reforms and strategic planning (such as the study on Cameroon's Vision 2035).

Once the initial funding expired in 2017, a transitional phase was conducted in 2018, with an in-depth study of the country's development capacity needs. Discussions on a new project document for a country program are ongoing and aim to redefine the terms of support, focusing on jointly developed priority pillars to strengthen the Centre's operational autonomy.

However, in the absence of a new financing agreement with the ACBF, and in a constrained national context marked by the fallout from geopolitical tensions, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the end of the FEC/IMF program, economic consolidation requirements, security issues, and electoral deadlines, CAMERCAP-PARC has seen its public subsidy reduced. This situation makes it all the more urgent to mobilize new financing mechanisms and strategically reposition the Centre as a tool for anticipating, proposing, and regulating public policies.

On the instructions of the Steering Committee, the CAMERCAP-PARC coordination unit has been tasked with developing a new organizational framework to be submitted to the supervisory authorities for approval. Indeed, through its regular participation

in MINEPAT (Ministère de l'Economie, de la Planification et de l'Aménagement du Territoire/ Ministry of Economy, Planning and Regional Development) activities, particularly coordination meetings, the Centre has seen the quality of its work recognized in a report that recommends classifying CAMERCAP-PARC as a structure attached to the ministry and funded under its budget. The Centre has also proposed that it be entrusted with the management of the economic monitoring unit. It is therefore proposed to give further consideration to the legal status and institutional positioning of the Centre, in particular by establishing it as an “Observatory for Strategic Studies and Analysis”, a technically and financially autonomous service attached to MINEPAT, with a steering committee and an operational unit.

After two four-year cycles of project implementation, and in view of the results achieved and existing demand, it appeared necessary for the main donor, notably the ACBF and the Government, to reorient its approach through an institutional change towards a *full policy unit* (according to the ACBF project nomenclature), corresponding to a think tank.

CAMERCAP-PARC's vision and strategy

Over the past five years, the strategic vision of CAMERCAP-PARC has undergone a significant evolution, marked by an adaptation to contemporary challenges and a stronger focus on the effectiveness of public policies (See Box 5 for CAMERCAP Strategic Plan).

1. Alignment with national and international priorities: CAMERCAP-PARC has refocused its efforts to support the National Development Strategy 2020-2030 (SND30) and the Sustainable Development Goals. The Centre has highlighted the importance of optimizing the capacity to plan and implement development policies, projects and programs, while emphasizing the need to streamline public and private institutions to ensure better policy coordination and effectiveness.

2. Strengthening governance and budget management: CAMERCAP-PARC identified shortcomings in the appropriation of the program budget by administrations, noting that this leads to malfunctions in budget programming and execution. The Centre has emphasized that many public investment projects are not relevant to the main missions of the concerned administration, leading to inertia in public action. Several policy briefs and strategic guidance notes are produced regularly to provide appropriate decision support to the relevant decision-makers.

3. Promotion of innovation and youth employment: the Centre has established an operational program within its youth support and coaching structure. Several studies on the youth target group have also been conducted, notably the 2024 study on technological innovation and the labor market, carried out in Cameroon and the DRC, highlighting the needs, capacities, and constraints of the private sector in sustainable development. A recent study revealed real enthusiasm among young people for the fields of technology and the environment, highlighting the importance of facilitating links between young innovators and the private sector.

In short, CAMERCAP-PARC has evolved towards a more integrated and pragmatic approach, aiming to strengthen the coherence of public policies, improve budget management, and promote innovation and youth employment, in line with national priorities and contemporary challenges.

Box 5. CAMERCAP-PARC's Strategic Plan

CAMERCAP-PARC's strategic plan is structured around three main areas:

- 1. Adoption of an integrated approach to human capital: Aiming to provide the country with the human capital necessary to achieve development objectives, particularly those of the National Development Strategy 2020-2030 (SND30);*
- 2. Optimization of policy programming and implementation capacities: Seeking to improve the effectiveness of development policies, projects and programs to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.*
- 3. Rationalization of public and private sector institutions: To ensure better coordination, coherence and effectiveness of public policies.*

CAMERCAP-PARC's mission has evolved to better respond to contemporary challenges:

- ▶ Assistance to the government: In the formulation and analysis of economic and social policies.
- ▶ Management capacity building: In public administration, the private sector and civil society for the implementation and monitoring-evaluation of public policies.
- ▶ Strengthening mechanisms to support youth employment and private entrepreneurship: By putting in place innovative mechanisms.
- ▶ Encouraging dialogue between the state and non-state actors: For greater social cohesion and participatory governance.

This adaptation of the mission reflects CAMERCAP-PARC's desire to play a proactive role in Cameroon's socio-economic transformation, in line with national priorities and international standards.

Organizational arrangements

The main donor, ACBF, maintains its confidence in and support for CAMERCAP-PARC. Initially providing core funding in the form of a grant, support has since become more project-specific due to donor constraints. The Government of Cameroon contributes significant institutional, logistical, and financial support. Other international institutions, such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the French Development Agency (AFD), also contribute to the financing of the Centre's activities. National organizations also place their trust in the center's activity. Equally, international services generate some of the center's own revenue. These include studies carried out for IDEC in Burundi, AERC in Kenya, and IFDD (Institut de la Francophonie pour le développement durable) in the French-speaking world.

Since its creation, the Center has been able to maintain its viability thanks to sustained demand for the fruits of its research from public decision-makers who are open to supporting research expenditure. It is therefore the innovative resources generated by the Centre that maintain its viability.

Activities and achievements

The transformation into a think tank in itself has been a great success, and a challenge given the prevailing institutional environment. Having a structure under the supervision of the government, which also receives state funding, but aims not to submit to the obligation of reserve or government discipline (a kind of internal censorship), has not been easy. How can you tell truths that do not sit well with the government and its various branches without running the risk of having your funding

suspended? How can you remain credible in your analyses and publications when you are subject to cash flow tensions that are obvious to everyone (without you being specifically targeted), without being tempted to give up? How can you continue to produce reports and analysis notes when you feel that the senior officials in the administration who receive them do not care?

However, feedback from the press, civil society actors who found food for thought in our work, and even some of these senior officials in an unofficial capacity convinced us to persevere. Lots of letters of encouragement and congratulations boosted the enthusiasm of our small team at the outset. Our analysis helped us understand that far from rejection or indifference, it was more a question of change management! People were not used to hearing this alarm bell that could come from within, with refutable arguments and data.

The development of the National Capacity Building Strategy in January 2014, which sets out 40 ideas for successfully launching the country's emergence, was a great success for the think tank's *raison d'être* and as a response to an increasingly present and pressing need. CAMERCAP-PARC is now inundated with requests from government actors, civil society and the private sector for capacity building (SIC Strategic Plan, Study on the Demographics of SMEs, participation in the second higher education conference, etc.). Among other things, there has been an increase in the volume and quality of publications.

Lessons learned from CAMERCAP-PARC experience

Four (04) main challenges face think tanks that want to establish themselves and develop in Central Africa:

- Breaking away from the *Magister dixit* through mastery of change management.
- Strengthening civil society organizations (CSOs) to drive and monitor the implementation of public policies (e.g., West Africa and other sub-regions).

- Strengthening a democratic culture that accepts and embraces change, transparency, and alternatives.
- Developing alternative and innovative sources of funding outside the state.

It should also be noted that the few functional think tanks in Central Africa face another obstacle: the lack of substantial resources. This substantially limits their output. Many of them operate on an annual budget of less than US\$1 million, creating financial vulnerability.

In an increasingly difficult environment, the reasons are not always clearly correlated. Yet, comparative analysis with other sub-regions of the continent and their practices shows that the Francophone colonial legacy of ECCAS is closely linked to weak sub-regional integration, despite enormous potential. Like all think tanks in Central Africa, CAMERCAP-PARC faces difficult political acceptance despite its timid involvement in the decision-making process.

Recommendations

This sub-region of sub-Saharan Africa is unique in that it has the fewest number of think tanks. This deficit is not only quantitative, but also qualitative. There are many reasons for this state of affairs: cultural obstacles, a lack of democratic culture, and illusory economic integration. Despite these bottlenecks, it appears that the few organizations that operate face other challenges, such as underfunding, a lack of state support, and a lack of awareness among the population, even though they participate in public debate by providing private expertise to the population and political decision-makers.

In order to develop, think tanks in Central Africa must overcome several challenges.

- Act as groups that truly represent society: that is, contribute their expertise to change people's living

conditions, as poverty is the exception that proves the rule in this part of Africa.

- Make themselves known and publicize their work using all legal and less legal means to influence the population and thus bring the debates into the public arena.

- Seek partnerships and new sources of funding to complete their projects, while recruiting qualified staff capable of innovating in their proposals with relevant recommendations.

- Focus studies on problematic sectors that are directly in line with the concerns of governments and supranational bodies such as the UN and the AU.

- Build a network to exchange information to influence public decisions.

Case of KIPPRA

In Kenya, concerns about dependence on foreign advisors and the implications for local capacity under the “Kenyanization” policy led to the proposal of establishing a policy institute that could provide the government with homegrown expertise in economic policy analysis. This idea came to fruition in 1999 when the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) became operational.

Creation of KIPPRA

In early 1990’s, Advisors from Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID) and the Long-Range Planning Project supported by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) provided most of the support in undertaking policy research and analysis. The external advisors worked with local counterparts, but public sector officials tended to leave service once trained, due to uncompetitive pay packages.

The idea to establish KIPPRA was mooted in the early 1990s, but it was not until June 1999 that the Institute became operational. The primary objective was to develop capacities in public policy research and analysis and support the government of Kenya in policy formulation and implementation. The need to establish a government think tank arose from multiple factors, principal among them was the need to develop local capacity in public policy analysis, in elaborating and using quantitative models for policy analysis and planning, and the need to reduce dependence on foreign advisors.

The Institute's vision is to be a leading public policy research institution in policy formulation and implementation, with a mission to deliver quality advice to government and stakeholders through rigorous research, analysis, capacity building, and outreach. Guided by its 2023–2027 Strategic Plan, KIPPRA's priorities include enhancing the relevance and quality of research, strengthening policy engagement and dissemination, deepening capacity development, promoting institutional sustainability, and leveraging digital technologies and data analytics (KIPPRA, 2023). These strategies align with Kenya's Vision 2030, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (KIPPRA, 2023).

KIPPRA also fine-tuned its core values in its latest Strategic Plan to better reflect its evolving identity and strategic direction. The refined values are: Knowledge, Inclusivity, Professionalism, Patriotism, Responsiveness, Accountability.

Legal framework

KIPPRA was established through a Presidential decree as a State Corporation under the provisions of the State Corporations Act of Kenya, pending the enactment of an appropriate legal instrument. In 2006, the Institute was properly established through the KIPPRA Act Cap 112A. According to section 5 of the Act, the Institute is established to develop human and institutional capacities, by undertaking economic forecasting, policy analysis,

and research, and contribute to the formulation of medium and long-term strategic perspectives for the economic and social development of Kenya. Such a legal basis has strengthened the Institute's operational autonomy through clearly defined powers, mandate, and administrative structures.

According to the KIPPRA Act, the institution, in consultation with the ministries responsible for planning, and national treasury and the Central Bank of Kenya, prepares and submits to the Minister, at least three months before the beginning of the next financial year, a report on (a) the performance of the economy of Kenya during the preceding financial year; and (b) the economic prospects for the next three financial years.

The Kenya Economic Report, prepared by KIPPRA pursuant to the above legal provisions, has become the Institute's flagship report. Since the inaugural publication produced in 2009, KIPPRA has produced seventeen reports, each focusing on a topical issue in addition to the legal requirement to assess recent performance and provide medium-term forecasts. As an example, the latest editions tackled such areas as Creating Decent Jobs for Prosperity (2025), Enhancing Productivity for Sustained Inclusive Growth (2024), etc.

The legal instrument establishing KIPPRA has to undergo various revisions to respond to the overall changing environment. For instance, the Constitution of Kenya 2010 brought major changes in the governance structure of the government especially with the creation of 47 county governments and institutionalization of values and principles of governance as stipulated in the Constitution. The KIPPRA Act is therefore under review to align it the Constitution and incorporate any new changes that have a bearing on performance and effectiveness of the Institute.

Developing the KTMM macro-model

The development of a macroeconomic model was one of the first projects of critical priority that KIPPRA undertook, starting

in January 2000. The lack of a quantitative tool, such as the Chakrabarti Model used before, also significantly undermined the Government's ability to support economic planning and macroeconomic policy analysis and programming, but also to develop a credible macroeconomic policy framework critical for presenting alternative policy scenarios for discussion with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during Article IV negotiations.

Developing a macro model for Kenya had crucial institutional capacity development considerations to ensure long-term sustainability. Among the key considerations were local staff involvement, skills transfer, training and short-term technical backstopping. KIPPRA staff thus implemented the project with technical support³ from the EU. The model was named KIPPRA-Treasury Macro Model (KTMM), signifying ownership and a joint effort between the Ministry of Finance and KIPPRA to fill the existing gaps in planning, budget forecasting, and policy simulations.

KTMM, as many other macroeconomic models, is a quantitative representation of the interrelationships between macroeconomic variables in an economy. It is an economic tool still in use, available to policy practitioners and researchers for macroeconomic forecasting, policy analysis, and simulations. The KTMM is also used for capacity building in macroeconomic policy formulation and analysis. It also provides a framework where the implications of different policy options can be discussed. Policymakers also need to have a sense of how future economic trends are likely to evolve under different scenarios. The model, therefore, facilitates informed policy discussions and debate.

3 EU Project no. 7 ACP KE 080, Institutional Support to the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA) implemented by Institute of Social Studies (ISS) and Micromacro Consultants (MMC), Netherlands

A critical sustainability issue in the design of the model was to ensure relevance. There was thus a need to guarantee that the model meets the needs of the government, especially the Ministry of Finance, for budget planning and forecasting. A fiscal module formed a vital component of the consistency framework, covering revenue and expenditure components and fiscal deficits, and how they are linked to other key macroeconomic variables.

The development of the mathematical model, including equation specification and estimation, was done with direct inputs from KIPPRA staff, economists from ministries of planning and finance, and research associates. The latter were brought in to fill internal capacity gaps and continued to engage with KIPPRA in various programs (KIPPRA, 2004).

The institutional framework for national planning and budgeting has also been favorable for the development and use of KTMM. Kenya's Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) budget process has Sector Working Groups led by relevant ministries that assist with producing sector budgets. The Macro Working Group (MWG), of which KIPPRA is a member, is mainly responsible for preparing the macroeconomic framework for the budget and annual Status of the Economy Report. The macroeconomic framework spells out the overall resource constraint and policy priorities that underpin the national budget process. Inputs from the Macro model inform the preparation of the Budget Policy Statement and Budget Review and Outlook Paper, especially the medium-term outlook. The MWG has also been responsible for developing the macroeconomic framework for medium-term plans for the Vision 2030. Vision 2030 is Kenya's long-term development blueprint and is implemented through five (5) year rolling medium-term plans since 2008. The model has been instrumental in setting macroeconomic targets, including growth targets.

During the period 2020 to 2024, KIPPRA updated the KTMM demand side model through estimation of behavioral equations related to exports, imports, CPI, money supply, wage employment,

interest rate, exchange rate, private consumption, and private investment. These were restructured using new and recent data and incorporating new coefficients into the model. In addition, a Supply Side Model has been developed as a complement to the Demand Side Model by capturing variables in the economy related to Agriculture, Industry, and Services, and specific factors affecting these sectors.

Capacity building

Another critical consideration for the sustainability of economic modeling was to develop local capacity through training. As part of the project design, a capacity building component was incorporated. KIPPRA staff were not only partaking in the elaboration of the macro-model, international consultants from Netherlands' ISS and MMC also trained selected KIPPRA staff and Ministry economists to use it. A dedicated team of macroeconomists was identified and assigned the task of continuously updating and undertaking policy simulations and forecasting. This structure is institutionalized and has been part of KIPPRA's annual work plan since 2000.

In this regard, the construction of KTMM was not undertaken as a turn-key project. In 2003 with support from ACBF, KIPPRA up-scaled the macroeconomic model training into a structured internship program called KIPPRA Young Professionals (KYP) Program. The program has evolved over time; the intake has increased from 12 in 2003 to 30 young professionals annually by 2021. The program focuses on conducting policy research; enlightening them on the governance structure in both the National and County levels; and economic tools of analysis. It is composed of coursework and hands-on training, during which the interns are required to attend KIPPRA internal seminars, may attend external workshops and conferences, and produce a research paper and policy brief. According to the KIPPRA Tracer Survey conducted in 2024, the majority of the beneficiaries of the program (97%) are satisfied with the skills gained and the level of support and materials given.

Since 2020, the training has also been bestowed on 30 KIPPRA-sponsored participants, drawn from the National and County governments and the private sector. From FY2024/25, the Institute expanded the intake to include self-sponsored participants, and the range of courses delivered to the participants has expanded. The Institute has developed a flexible capacity building policy to enable interested participants to undertake the KYP program through a modular approach. In addition, an E-learning component has been developed to facilitate flexible learning. As of 2025, the Institute had trained 330 young professionals. As the capacity building program is crucial in supporting planning and projects departments of the government at a national and country level, KIPPRA intends to increase this number to 800. The KIPPRA mentorship Program for Universities and TVETs has opened up the Institute's outreach to include universities and technical and vocational institutions. Every year, KIPPRA targets to reach over 3300 students and lecturers under this program.

Working with the Government

The primary objective of establishing KIPPRA was to support the government in policy formulation and implementation. During the early years of establishment, KIPPRA's support to the policy process was mostly through the Ministry of Planning, Finance, and Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA), through policy task forces and working groups. Thus, the two critical forums for engagement were the Macro Working Group and the Tax Policy Unit (TPU). The MWG is part of the MTEF budget sector working groups and prepares the macroeconomic framework for the budget and national plans. The MWG also prepares a state of the economy report that is presented to senior government officials. The MWG continues to be a useful avenue for KIPPRA to contribute to public processes through macroeconomic forecasting and research.

Starting from the late 2000s, the Institute participates in an average of 30 task forces and working groups annually. These forums provide an opportunity to inform the policy process

directly. While these are useful in informing policy, KIPPRA is grappling with the challenge of managing increased demands for policy advice and support vis-à-vis staff capacity. The number of policy research requests from government agencies has increased significantly, mostly responding to emerging policy challenges. There is thus the potential risk that staff time gets spread so thinly across many ad hoc exercises at the expense of core research work. Also, some of the engagements remain informal thus making it difficult to assess staff output and time spent on such support activities.

To enhance dialogue with stakeholders on emerging policy issues, the Institute convenes an average of 30 policy seminars per year and 30 roundtable meetings annually to receive input from stakeholders on ongoing KIPPRA thematic and interdisciplinary research and policy analysis work. The Institute also convenes at least 30 validation and dissemination workshops annually to share findings from completed research work. Key among them is the KIPPRA Annual Regional Conference (KARC), a three-day event that draws over 500 participants daily and is organized around a selected theme each year. The research outputs disseminated at the event emanate from a call for papers done earlier in the year.

Participation in Networks

KIPPRA is part of the T20 Africa Standing Group, a member of Southern Voice Network, Africa Think Tank Network and Africa Think Tank Forum. It was also one of the nine think tanks in Africa that sit on the T28 International Advisory Board. Not only do these collaborations enhance the Institution's credibility on the international stage, but they are also instrumental in knowledge sharing through improved access to comparative research, data, and policy insights from other think tanks and countries. They also allow for participation in joint training, workshops, and peer learning opportunities. Moreover, these networks provide an opportunity for regional and global policy dialogues, including G20 discussions. For instance, KIPPRA produced a policy

brief aimed at informing G20-level discourse on food security, reflecting KIPPRA's engagement in global policy discussions

KIPPRA also participates in cross-country collaborations such as the County Economic Transformation Outlook (CETO) Report for Kenya and Zambia in partnership with the African Centre for Economic Transformation (ACET), with plans to replicate the study in Ethiopia, Ghana, and Tunisia. The Institute also collaborates with international and regional think tanks such as the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Partnership for Economic Policy (PEP), the International Potato Centre, and development organizations such as the World Bank and FAO for specialized training, exchange programs, and collaborative studies.

Organizational Strategy

One of the approaches to long-term sustainability has been an organizational strategy that ensures the Institute rests on a sound institutional foundation supporting its vision as an international center of excellence in public policy research and analysis. The strategic objective has been to operate with clear policies and procedures guiding resource management and performance. Over time, KIPPRA has implemented institutional reforms to address challenges such as improving the quality of its products and services, enhancing staff performance, and maintaining a governance system that promotes accountability and transparency.

At its inception, the Institute began operations with a small staff and annual work plans, before adopting its first strategic plan in 2002. Rapid growth required establishing an efficient organizational structure aligned with its mission and vision. The structure initially consisted of a Board of Directors, an Executive Director, and six functional divisions. As the Institute expanded, new divisions and directorates were introduced to address emerging policy issues such as private sector development, governance, and trade. By 2020, the organizational framework included technical and

support directorates overseeing a broad range of departments, supported by a formal human resource system.

To strengthen quality, KIPPRA introduced a quality management system in 2007, securing ISO 9001:2015 certification and peer review processes that continue to ensure research excellence. More recently, the Institute has automated core operations, including financial management, performance monitoring, and risk management, supported by nearly 100 internal policies and strategies. This combination of structural reforms, quality assurance, and digital systems underpins its long-term sustainability and ability to meet stakeholder expectations.

Following the Public Service Commission's Rapid Results Initiative in Revision of Human Resource Instruments for State Corporations, all organizational structures for state corporations, including KIPPRA, are currently under review. Under the proposed new structure, the number of directorates will increase from 2 to 5, and the staff will expand to 290. Recruitment is being undertaken progressively to reach the approved number. To bridge gaps in capacity and skills, KIPPRA utilizes temporary staff, interns, and students on industrial attachment.

Funding

KIPPRA started operations with financial support for institutional development from the European Union, the Africa Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), and the Government of Kenya. In the early years, the Institute thus relied heavily on donor support. Other development partner resources have gone directly to specific research projects. The major ones included FCDO, USAID, UNEP, UNECA, UNICEF, and UNDP. The EU funding ended in 2010 without any possibility of extension. The emerging financing gap was filled mainly by new funding from the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) and increased government funding.

As KIPPRA gained recognition for its role in the public policy process, the government's contribution to its budget also grew.

Today, it oscillates around an average of 78%. However, resources from the government of Kenya continue to be constrained due to a tight fiscal space attributed to competing priorities, including infrastructure investment, social services, and implementation of devolution.

To provide a clearer understanding of KIPPRA’s funding structure over the past seven years, Table 2 summarizes the financing sources, highlighting the variations in contributions from the Government of Kenya, the European Union, and other research projects.

Table 2. Financing of KIPPRA's Activities for the last Seven (7) Years

	2024/ 2025	2023/ 2024	2022/ 2023	2021/ 2022	2020/ 2021	2019/ 2020	2018/ 2019
Government of Kenya (Percentage)	74%	76%	77%	81%	88%	80%	77%
European Union (Percentage)	-	7%	-	5%	-	4%	9%
KIPPRA Research Projects and Investment Income (Percentage)	26%	17%	23%	14%	12%	16%	14%
Total Income (Percentage)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total Income (Kshs'000')	519,150	714,728	687,379	733,491	471,676	534,582	408,617

Source: KIPPRA Annual Reports and Financial Statements

Globally, funding from development partners appears to be shifting away from core funding to specific projects, based on their interests. When the core funding from ACBF and TTI came to an end, KIPPRA continued to rely mainly on core funding from the government, supplemented by income from demand-driven capacity building, policy research, and analysis projects. Income from KIPPRA's own-sources, such as commissioned research, the sale of products, consultancies, training, and investments, fluctuates significantly, but has been financing close to one-third of KIPPRA activities in some years. This remains an essential pillar of sustainability in the acquisition and purchase of physical and research infrastructure, as well as supporting operational costs that are critical for retention of critical technical staff.

To avoid tipping the appropriate balance between long-term research agenda and client demand-driven research projects, KIPPRA has developed and is implementing a resource mobilization policy and strategy that emphasizes diversification of sources of both financial and non-financial resources.

As a government-affiliated think tank, KIPPRA must remain responsive to the evolving political and development priorities of the government. There is often an expectation that research aligns with national development priorities, such as those articulated in Vision 2030, the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda (BETA), and other strategic frameworks. While this alignment is essential for policy relevance and utility, KIPPRA carefully navigates this by ensuring that all research remains grounded in evidence, rigorous analysis, and methodological integrity. Institutional safeguards are in place, such as a well-defined research agenda approved by a Board of management, balancing short-term advisory roles with long-term strategic research. The Institute maintains a non-partisan stance and focuses on evidence-based analysis, which helps ensure that research findings are shared objectively, even when addressing politically sensitive issues. Stakeholder engagement across sectors allows for diverse perspectives and reduces the risk of bias.

Activities and achievements

Since 2020, the Institute has marked a series of important achievements that demonstrate its growing influence and commitment to excellence in public policy. Its recognition as a leading think tank was affirmed in the 2020 Global Go-To Think Tank Index Report, where it was ranked the second top think tank in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a regional leadership in policy research and influence. The Institute has also distinguished itself in advancing diversity and inclusion. In 2025, it was recognized as the Best State Corporation and SAGA (Semi-Autonomous Government Agency) on Equitable Allocation of Opportunities and Resources at the 7th National Diversity and Inclusion Awards & Recognition (DIAR), a clear testament to its dedication to equity and inclusiveness in the policy arena.

In the realm of climate action, the Institute launched the Youth in Climate Action Fellowship Program in 2024, empowering young professionals to actively contribute to climate policy development and implementation. Its role in capacity building has been equally significant, with the expansion of the Young Professionals Program to 40 participants, thereby scaling up opportunities for early-career policy professionals to gain practical experience. In FY2023/24, the Institute operationalized the Economic Modeling Hub (EMH) as a specialized department to develop economic modeling tools to support the research, policy analysis, and capacity development mandates of the Institute.

In March 2021, the Institute launched the KIPPRA Public Policy Repository (KPPR), an open-access, web-based platform that seeks to provide stakeholders with all National and County Government approved policy documents, in addition to KIPPRA publications. Since its launch, the Repository has recorded at least 2 million visits annually, testifying of its usefulness as a platform for stakeholder engagement on public policy, while supporting the linkage between research evidence and public policy-making process.

Recommendations

KIPPRA has made much progress in developing the relevant capacity to support the public policy process in Kenya, but there are emerging issues that have implications for the development and effectiveness of the Institute in supporting the policy process. The funding landscape is changing drastically, with most donors moving away from supporting institutional capacity development to project-specific support focused on specific policy issues. Funding from the government is also becoming lean due to a tight fiscal space and competing demands for public resources, including infrastructure and social services. Demands for policy advice are dynamic due to a changing overall policy environment, including regional integration and devolution.

The ongoing challenge for KIPPRA is to produce timely, relevant, and accessible policy research products and services on critical issues that the country faces. In the area of macroeconomic policy and modeling, there is need to recruit and retain skilled researchers in quantitative analysis to operationalize the KIPPRA Economic Modeling Hub. The Institute will continue embracing technological advancements to support the timely dissemination of research outputs, while utilizing virtual platforms and the media to engage stakeholders on emerging policy issues within the scope of its mandate. It is therefore imperative that the management and the board ensure that various dimensions of capacity development are part of the overall organizational strategy.

While KIPPRA has been able to sustain macroeconomic modeling and forecasting for the last twenty-four years, prospects hinge on the ability to maintain a dedicated core staff on the modeling work and ensure that the model remains relevant to the changing economic structure. In this regard, it is essential to incorporate the emerging extractive sector in the model. Kenya aims to be an upper middle-income economy, thus, understanding the macroeconomic implications of these new developments has considerable policy relevance. As the region gets highly integrated, especially in the context of the East African Community and

African Union, new policy issues emerge, such as those related to macroeconomic convergence that might require the re-orientation of the macroeconomic modeling exercise.

KIPPRA has increasingly integrated digital tools to enhance its research, communication, and internal operations. In research, advanced data analysis software and statistical modeling tools have been adopted to support evidence-based policy analysis. While AI integration is still at an exploratory stage, there is growing interest in leveraging machine learning for predictive analytics and policy simulations. Internally, digital workflow tools have been adopted for document management, virtual collaboration, and staff performance tracking, contributing to operational efficiency.

KIPPRA faces several institutional challenges that impact its operational effectiveness and long-term development. One major issue is the delayed implementation of its Research Data Management Policy due to insufficient financial resources, which has hindered the establishment of a comprehensive data repository system. Additionally, the construction of the planned KIPPRA Research Centre has stalled as a result of unresolved land acquisition and ownership issues. Compounding these challenges is a persistent shortage of staff, attributed to limited budgetary allocations, which has created a gap between the approved staffing levels and actual staff in post. This shortfall has led to staff overload and contributed to delays in meeting institutional objectives and delivering outputs on time.

KIPPRA maintains an active presence on major social media platforms, including Twitter (X), Linked In, Facebook, and YouTube. These channels are used to share policy insights, announce events, and engage with the public in real time. Social media activity is aligned with the Institute's broader outreach strategy, helping to increase visibility among youth, academia, and development actors. In terms of public engagement, KIPPRA organizes and participates in national and regional events such as

the KIPPRA Annual Regional Conference, KIPPRA Day, policy dialogues, and capacity-building workshops.

Case of ESRF

The Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) was established in 1992 and became operational in 1994, during a period when Tanzania was undergoing a profound shift from a socialist, command-driven economy to a market-oriented system. Its establishment reflected the recognition that the country needed strong local research institutions to provide credible analysis and guidance for policymaking at a time of sweeping economic reforms.

From the beginning, ESRF was envisioned as an independent, not-for-profit policy research institution dedicated to building national capacity for evidence-based decision-making. Its mandate included conducting and coordinating studies on economic and social issues, promoting public understanding of development challenges, and providing constructive expertise to support Tanzania's transformation agenda.

Over the years, ESRF has worked closely with government institutions, development partners, civil society organizations, the private sector, and other research entities, becoming a trusted source of analysis and advice. It has contributed to major national strategies, including the Tanzania Development Vision 2025, several successive Five-Year Development Plans (FYDP), and various sectoral policies on energy, environment, tourism, youth, and microfinance.

Beyond the national level, ESRF has supported regional planning through investment guides and fostered dialogue through platforms like the Tanzania Development Gateway and the Tanzania Knowledge Network (TAKNET). Its role has earned recognition across Africa, ranking it among the continent's leading think tanks. As it marked its 30th anniversary in 2024,

ESRF stood out not only as a witness to Tanzania's economic and social transformation but also as one of its key drivers, combining research excellence with a strong commitment to capacity building and inclusive development.

Vision and strategy

ESFR aims to become a center of excellence in policy research that directly informs Tanzania's socio-economic transformation and contributes to wider African development. Its vision is anchored in promoting evidence-based policymaking and fostering an environment where rigorous research supports national development goals, regional integration, and global policy dialogue.

Strategically, ESRF positions itself as both a trusted advisor to the Government of Tanzania and an independent platform for dialogue with diverse stakeholders, including civil society, academia, the private sector, and international partners. Over the years, the Foundation has structured its strategy around medium-term strategic plans, which guide its research priorities, capacity-building initiatives, and institutional development.

While this strategic vision has remained steady, refinements in focus have been introduced under the Seventh Strategic Plan (2022–2026), which prioritizes six thematic areas: inclusive growth, employment, and industrialization; globalization, regional integration, trade, investment and business facilitation; good governance and accountability; gender, social provision and protection; natural resource and environmental management; and the digital economy, knowledge management and innovation. Compared to earlier strategies, the current plan places greater emphasis on gender mainstreaming, the digital economy, and the systematic use of impact evaluations to assess development interventions. It also spans five years instead of the previous four-year cycles, aligning the Foundation's planning framework with the country's Five-Year National Development Plans.

Organizational arrangements and funding

ESRF is an autonomous, not-for-profit institution registered with the Registration, Insolvency, and Trusteeship Agency (RITA) under the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs. Its organizational structure is designed to strike a balance between independence and close collaboration with government institutions and development partners.

The management and leadership of ESRF are guided by Article V of its 2021 Amended Constitution, which establishes three governing organs: the Board of Trustees, the Executive Committee, and the Management team. The Board serves as the Foundation's supreme authority, overseeing administrative affairs, asset management, and resource mobilization. Board members are appointed by serving Trustees based on the Management's recommendations. The Executive Committee works closely with Management on strategy development, implementation reviews, budget approval, and the appointment of the Executive Director and senior staff. The Executive Director, appointed by the Board for a four-year term (renewable once), holds primary operational responsibility and participates in Trustee appointments. The Management Team oversees day-to-day operations, coordinates research activities, manages resources, and ensures alignment with the Foundation's strategic plans.

This governance structure has guided ESRF since its inception, with its sustained success attributed to the Board's strategic oversight and the appointment of high-integrity members respected in Tanzanian society, which enhances credibility and public trust. While effective in supporting institutional sustainability, the structure faces limitations, including the inability to appoint internationally recognized policy specialists due to funding constraints. As an illustration, the number of Board members was reduced from ten to seven in the 2021 amendment for cost efficiency, resulting in a current Board of seven Trustees.

Indeed, ESRF cannot match competitor salary benchmarks; however, it leverages non-financial incentives to retain researchers.

The key Challenge is salary competitiveness against NGOs, the private sector, and government agencies. The following considerations strive to address these challenges:

- ▶ Institutional Prestige: ESRF's status as Tanzania's premier policy think tank provides mission-driven motivation.
- ▶ Stakeholder Trust: National and international recognition enhances professional credibility.
- ▶ Leadership Support: Board and management foster collaborative, resource-enabled work environments.
- ▶ Impactful Work: High-priority assignments directly informing national policy.
- ▶ Professional Development: Domestic and international travel for conferences, fieldwork, and capacity building.

Furthermore, ESRF has adopted a new HR strategy that consists of encouraging re-entry programs for international PhDs. The pathway for returning scholars is to join ESRF as associates on project-based contracts. High-performing associates are prioritized for full-time roles when positions align with expertise. Second, ESRF also provides leadership pipeline development programs designed to equip them with technical skills and prepare them for future leadership roles; mentorship with high-potential staff.

ESRF has a total staff of 29 people. 24% of them are female and 76% are men. However, Gender diversity remains a strategic priority for future recruitment.

In 2024, ESRF operated under a diversified funding model, with contributions from the Government of Tanzania accounting for 15% of its budget, institutional support from a donor comprising 30%, and self-generated project funding making up 55%. This composition reflects a broader trend in donor behavior, where project-based funding restricted to specific programs or outcomes is increasingly favored over flexible core support that underpins operational sustainability. Such a shift limits ESRF's ability to invest in long-term institutional capacity, including

staff development, technology, and administrative infrastructure, while emphasizing short-term deliverables over strategic growth.

To mitigate funding unpredictability, ESRF has pursued multiple strategies. Revenue diversification includes fee-based training programs, particularly in impact evaluation, commissioned research for government and private-sector clients, and strategic advisory services. Partnerships with NGOs, academic institutions, and other think tanks have been leveraged to pool resources and expand funding access. Recent initiatives generating alternative income sources include collaborative projects with local NGOs, capacity-building and training programs, and the provision of conference facilities. ESRF has also emphasized equipping personnel with competencies in fundraising, grant proposal writing, donor engagement, and digital advocacy to foster a culture of innovation and enhance revenue generation strategies.

Localizing advocacy by engaging communities and influencing policy decisions has helped attract potential local donors aligned with ESRF's mission. Additionally, the Foundation has developed income opportunities through services and products such as the "Policy Labs" interactive workshops with government partners and subscription-based access to socioeconomic data products. Strategic partnerships further amplify impact and resource access: for example, in 2023, ESRF, in collaboration with Relied to Development Society (REDESO) and Women and Social Protection (WSP), secured \$1.2 million for the Unpaid Care project through IDRC, while core funding from the Hewlett Foundation, totaling \$600,000, was granted for 2024–2026. These approaches not only enhance ESRF's financial resilience but also enable the Foundation to pursue its mission sustainably, blending institutional stability with innovative, mission-aligned revenue streams.

Activities and achievements of ESRF

The Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) has established a strong reputation for conducting evidence-based

research, maintaining neutrality, and upholding independence, which has positioned it as a trusted partner in policymaking. Its work carries Pan-African relevance and has enabled the Foundation to engage in global policy debates beyond Tanzania's borders, fostering international partnerships and knowledge exchange. ESRF's research is closely linked to tangible policy outcomes, with findings and analyses frequently cited by Parliament, government ministries, and cooperative teams in the development of flagship national policies, demonstrating the direct impact of its work on shaping Tanzania's development agenda.

Indeed, ESRF played a leading role in formulating and reviewing pivotal frameworks such as the Tanzania Development Vision 2025, subsequent Five-Year Development Plans, and the emerging Vision 2050. Its expertise has also informed strategies in key sectors, including finance, energy, agriculture, tourism, exports, and natural resource management through engagements such as stakeholder planning for the Julius Nyerere Hydropower Project. (The Citizen, 2025)

Additionally, over the past decade, ESRF has organized policy dialogues, seminars, workshops, and conferences such as the 8th National Research Conference and its 30th-anniversary event, bringing together government officials, researchers, civil society, and international partners to discuss inclusive development themes. (Daily News, 2024) Also, ESRF has trained over two hundred policymakers, researchers, and practitioners through programs like the Impact Evaluation Laboratory. It has delivered postgraduate diplomas, short courses, fellowships, and training programs focused on policy formulation, governance, and research methods. (The Citizen, 2024)

Capacity Development Imperatives

Capacity development is the process through which individuals, organizations, institutions, and societies develop abilities, individually and collectively, to manage their affairs successfully.

It results in a change of knowledge, skills, work processes, tools, systems, authority patterns, and management styles of the beneficiaries over time. In Tanzania, the relevance of capacity development is stressed in the Second National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (NSGRP II), where the government and stakeholders alike acknowledge the significance of capacity development and recognize that the strengthening of capacity at various levels ought to be a priority. ESRF has not been successful in building the capacity of its own personnel despite a number of efforts to use internal capacity to enhance the capacity of staff internally. A very limited number of staff have been trained outside ESRF or abroad at higher degree levels, such as master's and PhD degrees.

On the other hand, ESRF is acknowledged by various stakeholders as being instrumental in capacity development in different areas of its policy analysis. Its initiatives and approaches include a post-graduate diploma program in poverty studies, as well as other short training courses that cover different topics like governance and accountability, policy formulation and analysis, and research methodology, to name a few. Furthermore, ESRF has conducted joint research and short-term assignments with public service experts with the aim of sharing knowledge and imparting skills. The Foundation also organizes work attachments for external junior and senior researchers, hosts visiting scholars, and runs short courses and policy dialogue seminars.

Currently, ESRF training themes are drawn from several areas earmarked in the Third National Five-Year Development Plan (FYDP III) and the National Vision 2025, namely leadership, policy analysis/formulation, the use of research-based evidence, strategic planning, project and program implementation, supervision, Sustainable Development Goals, Knowledge Management and Innovation, Natural Resource and Environmental Management, and monitoring. Other themes are derived from the training needs assessments and research outputs, under the seven major ESRF research areas. ESRF intends to promote effective policies that evolve through participatory processes. Thus, its dialogue

sessions, which may be based on internally generated research findings, will also give room for demand-driven topics emanating from emerging policy issues.

All the capacity development programs are designed in such a way that they meet the ESRF's broad and specific objectives spelled out earlier, but at the same time, there is recognition that research must generate results that meet stakeholders' expectations. To achieve this objective, ESRF will continue speaking out to ensure that there are adequate links between research and policy. ESRF will continue encouraging its stakeholders, CSOs, and private-sector actors, for example, to use the various research outputs extensively as instruments to influence public policy, as well as decision-making generally.

A variety of capacity development programs have been designed specifically to enable different stakeholders to benefit. For instance, training programs are tailored to contribute to building the capacity of government executives on policy analysis and economic management, including induction training programs for foreigners (businesspeople and donor experts coming to Tanzania). In addition, internships and staff exchange programs, as well as secondments and staff attachment programs between ESRF staff and government officials, have been organized to facilitate mutual learning and tapping experiences on policy processes and policy analysis. Similarly, other training programs have been designed to enable CSOs and private sector actors to access research-based evidence to contribute to the policy processes and to be able to conduct effective advocacy.

Stakeholders' dissemination workshops are also organized to coincide with the completion of a research project when the findings are ready for dissemination. These workshops include the Biennial Development Forum-- an event organized in collaboration with other collaborating institutions, such as the Ministry of Finance and Planning (MoFP), Department of Economics (DoE), and Research on Poverty Alleviation (REPOA).

ESRF Contribution and impact on socioeconomic development

Since its establishment, the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) has made profound contributions to Tanzania's socioeconomic development by positioning itself as a credible source of policy-relevant research and advisory services. Its work has evolved through four strategic phases, aligned with the funding cycles of its founding trustees, the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and the Government of Tanzania, while maintaining research as its core mandate.

ESRF has been central in generating evidence for policymaking, complementing this role with capacity development, training, consultancy, and extensive policy dialogues that shape national discourse. Over three decades, the Foundation has played a catalytic role in Tanzania's socioeconomic reforms across six planning phases, with its contributions consistently recognized in external and internal reviews (1994–2020). Among its most notable engagements are progress reviews of the National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (NSGRP I/II), the Zanzibar Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (ZSGRP I/II), the FYDP I/II/III, and the review of the Tanzania Development Vision (TDV) 2025, as well as the formulation of the Long-Term Perspective of TDV 2050.

ESRF also coordinated Tanzania's first and second Human Development Reports (2014 and 2017) and produced foundational studies for key policies, including the Agricultural Sector Development Strategies (ASDS I/II), the National Microfinance Policy, the National Energy Policy, the National Environmental Policy, and food and nutrition security frameworks. Through sector reviews in agriculture, infrastructure, and trade, as well as its coordination of national consultations during the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals, ESRF has provided evidence and platforms that supported Tanzania's average 7 percent economic growth over the past decade.

Lessons learned from the ESRF experience

ESRF is now in the course of implementation of its seventh strategic plan. With over 30 years of existence and operation, ESRF has gained tremendous experience now. While major achievements have been attained in the past and a series of challenges have been faced by the Foundation, many lessons can be drawn from its long experience of operations. The main one is a constructive and fruitful partnership with the government, a good reputation in the eyes of the non-government stakeholders and the general public, a track record of policy analyses, resilience to funding and other shocks, and the ability to adapt to new research areas and working with new partners. Other lessons include the ability to attract modest financial support from the government (around 15% of institutional budget over the past recent years) and good governance. Regarding staffing, the major characteristic has remained in talent management, particularly the inability to attract and retain senior researchers.

From the very beginning, the government of Tanzania was involved in discussions surrounding the creation of ESRF, a strategic move that allowed the Foundation to build a strong partnership with the government while maintaining its autonomy. This early engagement helped establish confidence and trust, facilitating ESRF's smooth entry into key government corridors. Since 2004, the government has made notable contributions to ESRF's annual budget, which has, in turn, attracted additional donor funding and strengthened the Foundation's financial performance. This support reflects the government's recognition of ESRF's role as an advisory think tank, whose outputs and impacts in social and economic development have reinforced government confidence.

Lessons from ESRF's experience also highlight the effectiveness of its institutional structure, particularly the democratic functioning of Management and the Board of Trustees, which operate well despite some challenges, including resource mobilization.

Challenges and difficulties – digitalization, communication, capacity building, regulatory context

Despite its recognized achievements, ESRF continues to grapple with structural and operational challenges that constrain its long-term effectiveness and institutional resilience. Financial sustainability remains a central difficulty, as the Foundation relies predominantly on project-based donor funding, which introduces volatility in long-term planning and limits its ability to invest in strategic research agendas or establish a sustainable endowment. Government contributions, while symbolically important, cover only a modest portion of the budget, leaving ESRF vulnerable to fluctuations in the international funding landscape.

Talent retention and capacity building represent another critical challenge: the Foundation struggles to attract and retain highly skilled researchers, particularly women, due to the more competitive salary structures of NGOs, government, and international organizations. Furthermore, limited resources hinder the continuous upskilling of staff in advanced and emerging research methodologies, such as big data analytics, artificial intelligence, and digital platforms, areas increasingly essential for policy-relevant research in a rapidly changing knowledge ecosystem.

The challenge of translating research into measurable policy impact also persists. While ESRF's publications and dialogues inform national debates, ensuring that evidence-based recommendations are systematically integrated into government decisions and tracking their real-world effects remains difficult. In addition, weak institutionalized linkages with civil society organizations and other domestic stakeholders have restricted opportunities for co-creation, dissemination, and broader ownership of research outcomes. These issues are compounded by regulatory and administrative constraints that shape the operational environment for think tanks in Tanzania, creating additional barriers to innovation, communication, and digitalization.

Taken together, these constraints, including financial volatility, capacity gaps, difficulties in impact measurement, and structural barriers, limit ESRF's ability to fully exploit its strategic research mandate, sustain a pipeline of high-quality talent, and position itself as a leading think tank capable of driving Tanzania's socioeconomic transformation in the digital era.

Levers and success factors

The success of ESRF rests on a combination of institutional, strategic, and contextual levers that have enabled it to remain a relevant and trusted think tank in Tanzania and beyond. One of the most significant levers has been its strong partnership with the Government of Tanzania, which has ensured not only direct policy uptake of ESRF's research but also regular financial contributions to its budget since 2004. This government support, while modest, around 15% of the institutional budget, has provided stability and acted as leverage to attract additional funding from international donors, multilateral partners, and philanthropic foundations.

Another important success factor is ESRF's determination for neutrality, independence, and evidence-based research, which has positioned it as a credible voice in national development debates. This reputation has made it possible for ESRF to play a catalytic role in shaping flagship policies such as the Five-Year Development Plans, the Tanzania Development Vision 2025, and sectoral strategies in agriculture, energy, and microfinance.

Governance and institutional arrangements have also been central levers of success. ESRF's democratic Board of Trustees and professional management structure have ensured transparency, accountability, and alignment with national priorities. This structure has strengthened donor confidence and enhanced the Foundation's ability to mobilize resources.

In addition, adaptability and resilience have been key. ESRF has demonstrated the ability to navigate shifting funding landscapes,

adapt to emerging research areas (such as climate change, digital economy, and inclusive growth), and remain relevant to the country's evolving socioeconomic needs. Its emphasis on capacity building, policy dialogues, and dissemination platforms has further amplified its influence, allowing it to link research outputs directly to policy uptake.

Finally, strategic positioning at the intersection of research, policy, and practice has been a defining lever. ESRF's work is not confined to academic research; rather, it is oriented toward practical solutions, advisory roles, and policy advocacy, ensuring that the evidence generated has a tangible impact on Tanzania's development trajectory.

Recommendations

Despite political and macroeconomic stability in Tanzania, which has paved the way for its economy to grow steadily at an annualized rate of about 7 percent during the past decade, poverty remains prevalent and stagnant, and there are significant inequalities between the rural and urban poor. Persistent poverty, inequality, and unemployment in Tanzania are closely linked to the ineffective implementation of socio-economic policies and strategies. Despite Tanzania's relative political stability and steady economic growth of approximately 7% per year over the past decade, poverty remains widespread, with stark rural-urban inequalities. Limited access to education and employment opportunities in rural areas drives significant youth migration to urban centers, while low agricultural investment, uneven resource distribution, land degradation, deforestation, and climate change exacerbate rural poverty. Poverty is also highly gendered: around 60% of Tanzanian women live in extreme poverty and face systemic barriers to accessing productive resources.

Overall, these persistent socioeconomic challenges are reinforced by ineffective policy implementation, underutilization of local research expertise, weak planning and coordination capacity, insufficient enforcement of laws, misaligned local and national

frameworks, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, highlighting the critical need for stronger partnerships between governments and local think tanks to translate research into tangible, inclusive development outcomes.

Sectoral and local government authorities frequently lack practical guidelines to align their policies and strategies with national frameworks effectively, while monitoring and evaluation of policy outcomes on the ground remain inadequate. Several structural and institutional factors contribute to this situation. Among the key issues, one can mention the historical hesitation and delays in utilizing the expertise offered by local think tanks, which limit evidence-based decision-making at both the national and district levels. This challenge is compounded by the limited capacity of planners, weak enforcement of laws and regulations, resource constraints, and inadequacies in project, program, and activity prioritization, often influenced by conflicting interests.

African national governments must actively promote local think tanks. While maintaining institutional autonomy is essential, fostering strategic partnerships between think tanks and governments is urgently needed to build state confidence and secure sustainable support. This will enable governments to leverage currently underutilized domestic expertise, thereby stimulating socioeconomic transformation across Africa. Crucially, governments should integrate think tanks' strategic plans into national development frameworks. This integration recognizes research as a public good that requires robust public funding; without such support, operational costs become prohibitive, making evidence-based public knowledge production impossible. Note that public goods inherently entail externalities; internalizing these through institutional support is fundamental for think tanks to thrive.

Capacity development for individuals and institutions is essential for Africa's prosperity. Most policy failures across the continent stem from critical capacity gaps among key actors and implementing institutions. In Tanzania, for example, unmet

MDGs directly reflect insufficient engagement and capability at grassroots levels, including LGAs, farmers, fisherfolk, and traders. For policies and programs to succeed, frontline capacity building must be prioritized. African think tanks can play a catalytic role by identifying systemic gaps and strengthening stakeholders' capabilities. Therefore, governments must first invest in building their think tanks' capacity to enable these institutions to develop other economic actors effectively.

Case of ZEPARI

Over the past few decades, Southern Africa has grappled with significant economic volatility. Southern Africa is one of the most diverse subregions on the continent, combining middle-income economies such as South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia with lower-income and fragile states like Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. The region has historically relied heavily on natural resources and primary commodities, but is also experiencing a gradual shift toward services, manufacturing, and digital innovation. Persistent challenges such as high youth unemployment, climate vulnerability, inequality, and political instability in parts of the region continue to test the capacity of both national governments and regional institutions.

Regional integration is guided by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which promotes trade liberalization, infrastructure connectivity, and collective security. Yet, regional cooperation frameworks in Southern Africa often face difficulties in implementation due to disparities in state capacity, overlapping memberships in regional economic communities, and the tension between national interests and regional commitments. Moreover, pressing transboundary issues such as migration, public health, energy transition, and climate adaptation demand coordinated responses that stretch beyond national policymaking. Addressing these challenges requires not only formal governmental mechanisms but also spaces for

dialogue, independent analysis, and policy innovation that can bridge technical expertise and political decision-making.

As Southern Africa deepens its integration into continental frameworks such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and pursues Agenda 2063, think tanks are increasingly called upon to support evidence-based policymaking on complex issues. The digitalization of economies, climate finance, and cross-border infrastructure development all present opportunities for think tanks to shape policy debates and strengthen accountability. With sustainable funding and stronger links to both government and grassroots actors, think tanks in Southern Africa can help ensure that regional integration delivers inclusive growth and resilience for the populations they serve.

Creation and evolution of ZEPARI

The institution's history stretches back to the early 2000s, when the Government of Zimbabwe, through the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, sought to establish a dedicated economic policy think tank. In September 2000, the Ministry submitted a proposal to the African Capacity Building Foundation requesting financial support to create ZEPARU. The proposal emphasized the importance of strengthening national capacity for economic management during a period of deep macroeconomic challenges. ACBF approved the request and committed US\$1.5 million to be disbursed over a four-year period.

ZEPARU was officially launched on 14 October 2004 by the Minister of Finance and Economic Development. The launch featured a stakeholder workshop that convened government officials, private sector representatives, and civil society actors to deliberate on the institute's proposed research and capacity-building agenda. These consultations revealed diverse expectations and research priorities, underscoring the demand for evidence-based policy research in Zimbabwe.

Effective March 10, 2022, the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Unit (ZEPARU) underwent a formal name change to become the Zimbabwe Economic Policy Analysis and Research Institute (ZEPARI).

Vision and strategy of ZEPARI

The primary rationale for establishing ZEPARI was to meet the government's economic policy analysis and research needs, and to provide impartial policy advice that would enhance the government's capacity to initiate, adapt to, and manage change more effectively.

The establishment of ZEPARI was intended to provide an appropriate institutional framework for channeling available skills and expertise into the policy research and analysis space. The absence of this institutional capacity within government to respond quickly and decisively to rapidly changing domestic and international economic environments was seen as a missing link in the policy-making process. The government was encouraged by similar initiatives on the continent, where ACBF had provided catalytic funding to the establishment of Policy Thinks to support evidence-based policymaking. This emerging trend of establishing Policy Think Tanks was based on the premise that policies and decision-making are better when they are based on sound empirical evidence and solid rational analysis.

The mandate of ZEPARI was to undertake economic policy analysis and research, as well as to provide professional development and capacity building for public sector economists. The findings of the policy analysis and research were to be disseminated to a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including those from the public and private sectors, academia, and civil society. The new institution was expected to emerge as a reputable economic think tank capable of generating and disseminating policy options and establishing an intellectual linkage with other Think Tanks that would enrich national policy

dialogues and perspectives on monetary policy formulation and implementation.

ZEPARI's mandate extended beyond policy research to include comprehensive capacity-building initiatives. It encompassed policy-oriented research studies, in-service training, and fellowship programs, all aimed at strengthening analytical capacity within government. The overarching purpose was for ZEPARI to deliver first-rate, well-articulated economic research and policy analysis to inform government decision-making, in line with established priorities and targets. Equally, ZEPARI was expected to disseminate high-quality analysis on pressing short- and medium-term economic challenges facing Zimbabwe, while building the government's long-term capacity to utilize policy analysis on a sustainable basis.

A complementary objective of ZEPARI was to provide systematic training for government staff. This included funding postgraduate training fellowships and supporting a range of professional development activities, such as in-service courses, work attachment programs (both domestically and abroad), workshops, conferences, and seminar series. These initiatives were designed to strengthen the analytical skills base of public-sector officers, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and efficiency in policy formulation and implementation.

Organizational arrangements and funding

Since 2020, the organizational structure of ZEPARI has remained unchanged. The organogram contains 14 positions, although only 10 are currently filled. Recognizing the importance of human resources for institutional effectiveness, staff retention has remained a key priority. To address this, ZEPARI has implemented a mix of monetary and non-monetary incentives. Current measures include a car loan scheme and fuel allowances; both designed to enhance staff mobility and reduce the cost burden of commuting to and from work.

Looking ahead, the institution is actively working to strengthen its incentive framework to support staff motivation and retention further. Proposed measures include the introduction of performance-based bonuses, increased opportunities for professional development and training, as well as staff exchange programs with other research think tanks within the region and internationally. These initiatives aim to enhance both the institutional knowledge base and the team's overall effectiveness.

ZEPARI's governance framework is anchored by a Board of Trustees composed of representatives drawn from key local institutions across the public and private sectors. The Executive Director, in addition to leading the institution, serves as an ex officio member of the Board of Trustees, thereby ensuring close alignment between governance oversight and operational leadership.

Over the years, significant shifts in donor behavior have shaped ZEPARI's financial model. The most notable trend has been the move away from core institutional funding toward project-based financing. While the latter supports targeted activities with measurable deliverables, it also restricts flexibility in long-term planning and investment in institutional development. The decline of core support left ZEPARI exposed to operational vulnerabilities, particularly in times of fiscal constraint.

In response, ZEPARI adopted a revised business model in 2015 that places increased emphasis on consultancy work to complement its policy research activities, which the government and development partner's support. This shift has helped diversify revenue sources and reduce donor dependency. However, the unpredictable nature of consultancy contracts has introduced cash flow volatility, occasionally undermining institutional stability. To enhance its financial sustainability, ZEPARI has implemented several strategic initiatives. These include efforts to broaden its consultancy client base and the piloting of fee-based training programs designed to generate recurrent income. Additionally, ZEPARI is exploring new avenues for

support, particularly partnerships with local corporations and philanthropic organizations, which remain largely untapped.

Today, ZEPARI's financial structure is currently anchored in two primary sources: government grants, which account for approximately 60% of its 2025 budget, and self-generated income, largely from project-based consultancy work, making up the remaining 40%.

Collaboration has also emerged as a key pillar of ZEPARI's sustainability strategy. By engaging in joint research projects with peer think tanks in Zimbabwe and across the region, ZEPARI has expanded both its intellectual reach and funding opportunities. These partnerships not only enhance the quality and visibility of its research but also contribute to efforts to mobilize resources. Collectively, these approaches reflect ZEPARI's strategic commitment to financial independence and resilience.

Looking ahead, ZEPARI continues to prioritize financial sustainability as a strategic objective. This includes pursuing innovative financing models, strengthening partnerships, expanding its service offerings, and advocating for greater appreciation of the role of evidence-based research in policymaking. By anchoring its operations in a diversified and adaptive funding model, ZEPARI aims to ensure the continuity and impact of its work in support of Zimbabwe's development agenda.

Activities and achievements of ZEPARI

By generating context-sensitive, nationally relevant knowledge and building capacities for evidence-based policy formulation and implementation, ZEPARI is emerging as a go-to Think Tank in Zimbabwe. Policy research conducted by ZEPARI has made significant contributions to the debate on key economic issues, most notably in the areas of macroeconomic policy, economic growth drivers, cost drivers, financial sector development, value chains, and mining development, among others.

This outcome is a direct result of the direct support provided by ZEPARI's funding partners to strengthen the organization's institutional capacity, thereby increasing the volume and quality of research available to inform economic policy reform and the government's capacity to absorb evidence. However, for ZEPARI to continue producing public goods as a think tank, there is a need for consistent and sustainable funding sources for the institution's research work.

The organizational structure of ZEPARI has remained intact despite the loss of key staff, which induced a decline in research activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, ZEPARI has weathered the storm and is on course to strengthen its human resource base. To achieve this, ZEPARI has been focusing on both monetary and non-monetary incentives to address staff retention.

ZEPARI's engagement in collaboration with Regional and International Think Tanks reflects the emergence of ZEPARI as a credible Policy Think Tank not only in Zimbabwe but also in the region and internationally. ZEPARI has also been an active member of the ACBF Policy Institute Committee (PIC) since its inception, with its Executive Director serving as Vice President of PIC for two terms. ZEPARI is also actively participating in the Africa Think Tank Network (ATTN) as part of the Think Tank Taskforce, developing a framework for the financial sustainability of African Think Tanks.

Since its inception, ZEPARI has organized research dissemination workshops, seminars, policy dialogue events, and international conferences. The institution's convening power and attraction of key policy actors are growing, reflecting the maturity of the organization as a credible Think Tank. Its capacity to collaborate and jointly host important conferences and seminars has also increased.

ZEPARI has witnessed growth in its convening power over the years through improvements in the quality and relevance of the research dissemination workshops, seminars, policy dialogue

events, and international conferences that it organizes. The institution has witnessed an increase in demand for its services through the networks generated through these events. ZEPARI staff members are also being invited to make presentations on diverse economic topics at conferences organized by other institutions, including Business membership organizations.

Co-hosting high-level conferences and dissemination workshops facilitated the leveraging of limited resources to assemble quality research papers and presenters who appealed to a broad spectrum of stakeholders, thereby creating greater influence on policy actors/makers. These partnerships have raised ZEPARI's visibility beyond Zimbabwean borders. This further increased the scope for collaborative partnership in regional research work.

From the beginning, ZEPARI recognized the importance of institutional development. One of its earliest activities was a team-building workshop designed to foster collaboration, enhance efficiency, and cultivate a cohesive organizational culture. To further strengthen its operations, ZEPARI undertook a benchmarking mission to leading East African think tanks, including the Institute of Policy Analysis (IPA), the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA), the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), and the Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) in Tanzania. These engagements provided valuable lessons in think tank governance, research production, stakeholder engagement, and resource mobilization. The ZEPARI Board of Trustees formally adopted many of the recommendations from this mission, using them to guide the Institute's early growth.

ZEPARI also benefited from a range of institutional support initiatives, particularly those facilitated by ACBF. Senior staff, including program managers, finance officers, and monitoring and evaluation personnel, participated in specialized training programs to strengthen financial management, procurement systems, and administrative procedures. ZEPARI's active participation in regional knowledge-sharing platforms, such

as the Technical Advisory Panels and Networks (TAPNETs), the Policy Institute Committee (PIC), and the Africa Think Tank Network (ATTN), further contributed to its institutional development by enabling peer learning and the exchange of best practices.

Together, these efforts have significantly enhanced ZEPARI's capacity to deliver timely and relevant policy research while supporting national goals of evidence-based decision-making. Guided by its strategic vision of becoming Zimbabwe's leading center of excellence in policy research and analysis, ZEPARI continues to align its research and training activities with the country's evolving development priorities.

Its mission to undertake demand-driven research and provide capacity-building services remains at the heart of the Institute's work. Through this dual focus, ZEPARI not only contributes to better public policy but also helps build a pipeline of skilled professionals capable of shaping Zimbabwe's economic future.

Lessons learned from the ZEPARI experience

A key lesson for emerging think tanks is the value of offering competitive and stable employment to retain talent and build institutional memory.

Through engagement with regional and international think tanks, ZEPARI came to understand that the relationship between research and policymaking is not a linear one. Research alone does not automatically translate into policy action. Instead, the uptake of evidence depends on its relevance, timing, and how well it aligns with the prevailing political and social context. Policymakers may disregard technically sound findings if they conflict with political realities or policy agendas.

Therefore, the influence of a think tank depends not only on the quality of its research but also on its ability to communicate findings effectively, build strategic alliances, and engage in policy

advocacy. Credibility, proactiveness, adaptability, and strong partnerships with institutions that have policy influence are essential success factors. In environments where there is limited demand or capacity for evidence-based decision-making, think tanks must go further, investing in packaging research outputs for various audiences and lobbying for a greater appreciation of the value of evidence-informed policymaking.

Challenges and difficulties

ZEPARI has faced a series of challenges in its journey to becoming a credible think tank within Zimbabwe's policy landscape. Like many similar institutions in the developing world, ZEPARI has struggled with institutional stability and financial sustainability. Sustaining such a think tank requires long-term investments, particularly in core funding and capacity development resources that are often in short supply in Zimbabwe and other developing nations.

ZEPARI's financial challenges became particularly acute after the conclusion of its second ACBF grant in November 2014. This, coupled with Zimbabwe's broader fiscal constraints, placed significant strain on the Institute's operations. While the USAID-funded Strategic Economic Research and Analysis (SERA) program provided some programmatic funding in 2015, ZEPARI found it challenging to meet its basic financial obligations, including staff salaries and operational costs.

ZEPARI also lacks adequate working infrastructure. ZEPARI's new business model has also worsened the financial constraints, notably the irregular nature of consultancy income, which affects cash flow stability. ZEPARI operated in a volatile macroeconomic environment, marked by hyperinflation, exchange rate misalignments, and persistent foreign currency shortages. These factors have eroded the value of available financial resources, further constraining Zimbabwe's fiscal space. Public financing to grant-aided institutions, such as ZEPARI, has been reduced over

time, and the absence of predictable core funding from donors has exacerbated these challenges.

While consultancy work has helped keep ZEPARI afloat, its unpredictability has introduced significant cash flow challenges. The shift from core funding to project-based funding has intensified this pressure. Moreover, competition for donor funding has become fiercer, with foundations and donors demanding more measurable impact and influence on policy processes. As a result, ZEPARI has faced growing pressure to expand its engagement with civil society and the private sector to meet its funding needs.

The broader policy environment in Zimbabwe has posed unique challenges for ZEPARI. The country's economic and political landscape has fluctuated between crisis-driven responses and short-term interventions, leaving little room for long-term, research-based policy analysis. This environment created a mismatch between policymakers' demand for quick fixes and the slow, methodical nature of rigorous economic research.

Levers and success factors

ZEPARI's ability to navigate financial challenges and maintain institutional stability is a testament to its effective financial stewardship. Since its inception, the Institute has consistently received audit reports from its auditors reflecting its solid financial management practices. This has not only enhanced the institution's credibility but also contributed to its revenue generation, particularly through effective fund management for various projects. As a result, ZEPARI has proven its value by consistently delivering high-quality research outputs that meet the expectations of its growing stakeholder base.

Despite facing funding constraints, ZEPARI has become a recognized and influential player in Zimbabwe's policy landscape. The Institute's research has shaped key national policy initiatives and contributed to the development of several

important policy documents. For instance, ZEPARI's work on mining and economic growth has garnered significant attention from government ministries, private sector actors, civil society organizations, and even international institutions, such as the U.S. Library of Congress.

ZEPARI's growing visibility is also evident in its active participation in national policy dialogue platforms. The Institute has been instrumental in organizing and engaging in pre- and post-budget seminars, consultations on major policy frameworks, and the Zimbabwe Economic Development Conference (ZEDCON). Additionally, ZEPARI has been involved with local government structures on topics such as devolution and governance, further cementing its role in shaping policy across multiple levels of government.

As demand for evidence-based policy advice has increased, ZEPARI has continued to receive research commissions from a diverse range of stakeholders, including government ministries, private sector firms, and civil society organizations. This growing demand for quality research and analysis underscores the Institute's expanding role in shaping Zimbabwe's development trajectory.

ZEPARI's capacity-building efforts continue to be a cornerstone of its activities, with the Institute being commissioned to draft Zimbabwe's new industrial policy as part of its ongoing contributions to government policy initiatives. The 2020-2025 Strategic Plan defined ZEPARI's priorities, focusing on consolidating its credibility, diversifying funding sources, and enhancing its visibility as a trusted source of policy-relevant research.

Recommendations

ZEPARI's experience offers valuable lessons for emerging and maturing think tanks across the continent. Key strategic priorities as we advance include:

- ▶ **Securing Long-Term Funding:** To ensure institutional sustainability, ZEPARI must broaden its funding base by diversifying its donor base, increasing commissioned work, and exploring innovative financing mechanisms.
- ▶ **Enhancing Research and Knowledge Management Capacity:** Strengthening technical capacity, particularly in data analytics, policy modeling, and communication, is crucial for enhancing the quality and impact of research outputs.
- ▶ **Measuring Research Impact:** Developing robust systems to track the influence of research on policy outcomes will help demonstrate value to stakeholders and guide strategic improvements.
- ▶ **Deepening Policy Networks and Partnerships:** Building alliances with civil society, the private sector, academia, and the media will enhance the uptake of research findings and foster a more receptive policy environment.
- ▶ **Promoting Evidence Demand:** Encouraging a culture of evidence-based policymaking requires continuous engagement with policymakers and capacity development within government to effectively absorb and utilize research findings.

ZEPARI's journey reflects the complexity of building and sustaining a think tank in a resource-constrained and politically dynamic context. Yet, it also illustrates that with strategic leadership, strong governance, adaptability, and an unwavering commitment to quality and relevance, think tanks can play a transformative role in shaping national development policies.

Comparative Analysis

Cross-Case Patterns

Governance and Leadership

Across all five cases, governance structures and leadership ethos emerge as central to institutional resilience. CERAPE and ESRF, both independent foundations, rely heavily on governance mechanisms that emphasize accountability, transparency, and inclusiveness. Their general assemblies and participatory decision-making processes have been crucial in legitimizing their work and securing the trust of partners. Leadership in these cases has been marked by meritocratic values, openness to youth, and an insistence on methodological rigor.

The government-affiliated institutions—CAMERCAP, KIPPRA, and ZEPARI—derive legitimacy from their formal anchoring within state structures. KIPPRA, for instance, benefits from a statutory basis under the KIPPRA Act of 2006, which ensures stability and clarity of mandate. CAMERCAP's alignment with the Presidency and central ministries secures high-level access, while ZEPARI's governance board is structured to ensure strong ties to the public sector. However, the advantages of formal state affiliation also expose these institutions to political pressures. Their governance structures protect survival, but sometimes at the cost of autonomy.

Funding and Resource Mobilization

The question of funding is perhaps the most critical factor distinguishing different institutional trajectories. CERAPE and ESRF, as independent centers, depend overwhelmingly on project-based donor grants. This provides a degree of autonomy from government but subjects them to volatility and misalignment

with long-term strategic goals. CERAPE's annual budget has rarely exceeded USD 100,000, a figure that is insufficient for professionalization or systematic dissemination. ESRF, despite a more diversified portfolio, continues to rely on donor project cycles that limit its ability to pursue independent research agendas.

By contrast, the government-affiliated think tanks enjoy greater budgetary predictability. KIPPRA receives almost 80 per cent of its funding from the state, while CAMERCAP and ZEPARI also depend heavily on government subventions. This ensures survival even in lean times but ties financial health to the fiscal stability and political will of the state. In contexts of economic crisis or political volatility, as in Zimbabwe, reliance on state funding can become a liability. None of the five cases demonstrates fully developed diversification models that include endowments, significant fee-for-service revenues, or strong private-sector philanthropy. This leaves all institutions exposed to funding risks of one form or another.

Human and Institutional Capacity

Human capital has emerged as a key area of innovation across cases, even where financial resources are scarce. CERAPE has distinguished itself by systematically recruiting young researchers and research interns, combining methodological training with fieldwork to accelerate capacity development. ESRF integrates training into its projects, while ZEPARI has specialized in building the skills of government economists. KIPPRA's Young Professionals Program has become a continental benchmark for cultivating new generations of policy analysts, and CAMERCAP has focused on building technical cadres in support of state strategies.

Yet these successes are tempered by structural weaknesses. All five institutions face difficulties in retaining skilled staff due to low salaries and limited incentives compared to international

organizations or the private sector. Gender balance remains uneven, with women underrepresented in leadership and research positions. Capacity-building initiatives are vital, but without sustained institutional support and career incentives, they risk becoming temporary rather than transformative.

Policy Influence and Uptake

The impact of think tanks on policy varies significantly depending on institutional model and political context. KIPPRA's integration into the state system has enabled it to shape budgetary and macroeconomic policy directly, with its annual Kenya Economic Report serving as a key reference document for policymakers. CAMERCAP has been central in designing and monitoring Cameroon's National Development Strategy 2030, while ZEPARI has influenced fiscal, mining, and industrial policies in Zimbabwe.

For independent centers such as CERAPE and ESRF, policy influence depends on credibility, relevance, and persistence. CERAPE's contributions to Congo's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper and its cross-country study on SME resilience illustrate how small institutions can shape debates when research is rigorous and timely. ESRF's role in Tanzania's Vision 2025 demonstrates how independence can coexist with high levels of government trust. Across all cases, however, a recurring challenge is the uneven uptake of domestic research. Policymakers often privilege international consultants and agencies, undercutting the role of local think tanks.

Networks and Partnerships

Membership in regional and global networks has proved indispensable. CERAPE's involvement in AERC, CODESRIA, and IDRC programs has expanded opportunities for training and visibility, compensating for its fragile domestic environment.

ESRF and KIPPRA have benefited from global linkages, including their engagement in Southern Voice and the T20 Africa networks, which position them within global policy debates. ZEPARI leverages its historical connection to ACBF and its ties within SADC, while CAMERCAP has remained more nationally focused, limiting its regional impact. The comparative evidence suggests that networking is not peripheral but central to sustainability, particularly for think tanks in politically fragile or resource-scarce settings.

Emerging Trends

The case studies, when viewed against the backdrop of Africa's broader development agenda, highlight several emerging trends likely to shape the sustainability and influence of think tanks over the coming decade. These trends extend beyond the immediate concerns of funding and governance, pointing to more profound structural transformations in the political economy of knowledge.

The Digital Turn and the Rise of Artificial Intelligence

Perhaps the most disruptive trend is the accelerating digital transformation. Across the continent, mobile penetration, data availability, and digital literacy have expanded rapidly, creating both opportunities and demands for evidence that is timely, data-driven, and accessible. ESRF's foray into digital economy research and CERAPE's development of methodological training manuals that incorporate digital tools illustrate how think tanks are beginning to adapt. Yet the implications go further. Big data analytics, open-source statistical platforms, and artificial intelligence now offer think tanks the possibility of conducting analysis at unprecedented speed and scale. At the same time, digital platforms such as webinars, podcasts, and social media channels are revolutionizing the dissemination of knowledge, expanding reach to youth, civil society, and regional stakeholders.

For African think tanks, the challenge is to embrace these tools without sacrificing methodological rigor or falling prey to the spread of misinformation that also characterizes the digital age.

Continental Integration and the AfCFTA Moment

A second trend is the growing centrality of continental policy frameworks. The implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), alongside Agenda 2063 and continental initiatives on industrialization, climate change, and health, creates new demand for think tanks that can work beyond national silos. CERAPE's regionalization into the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Cameroon offers one example of how institutions can position themselves within regional debates. For others, the challenge is to align research with regional economic communities (RECs) and continental institutions such as the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank, and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. AfCFTA, in particular, requires policy analysis on trade facilitation, non-tariff barriers, digital trade, and gender-inclusive industrialization—areas where domestic ministries often lack expertise. Think tanks that can fill this gap will become indispensable actors in Africa's integration journey.

The Demographic Dividend and Youth Inclusion

Africa's demographic profile continues to shape the agenda for knowledge institutions. With more than 60 percent of the population under the age of 30, think tanks cannot remain elite enclaves of senior academics. Youth pipelines, as demonstrated by KIPPRA's Young Professionals Program and CERAPE's integration of research interns, have proven effective strategies for renewal and dynamism. But the opportunity is larger still. Young Africans are increasingly entrepreneurial, digitally savvy, and politically engaged. Think tanks that harness their energy—through fellowships, training, mentorship, and co-creation of

knowledge—will not only strengthen their own sustainability but also contribute to building a new generation of policy leaders. Gender equity is integral to this trend. While progress has been uneven, the inclusion of women researchers and leaders is essential both for institutional legitimacy and for ensuring that policy analysis reflects the lived realities of Africa's societies.

Shifts in the Donor Landscape and the Rise of Domestic Philanthropy

The funding environment for African think tanks is also evolving. Donor priorities have shifted towards short-term, project-specific interventions, often linked to global issues such as climate change, migration, and governance. While this creates opportunities for engagement, it also fragments institutional agendas. At the same time, there is growing interest in mobilizing domestic philanthropy and private-sector partnerships. High-net-worth individuals, African foundations, and corporate social responsibility programs are slowly emerging as potential funders of knowledge production. The Mastercard Foundation's support to research networks and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation's investments in governance indicators are early signs of this shift. Think tanks that succeed in cultivating such partnerships will reduce dependence on volatile donor cycles and strengthen local ownership of research agendas.

The Return of the State and the Demand for Evidence

Another trend is the renewed role of the state in Africa's development, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and in response to global shocks such as climate change and geopolitical tensions. Governments are increasingly expected to play proactive roles in industrial policy, digital regulation, and social protection. This resurgence creates opportunities for think tanks to provide timely and context-specific evidence. However, it also raises risks of politicization and co-optation, especially for state-affiliated

institutions. The experiences of KIPPRA, CAMERCAP, and ZEPARI show both sides of this dynamic: stable funding and strong access, but limited critical space. Independent think tanks must navigate carefully, balancing constructive engagement with the preservation of autonomy.

Knowledge Pluralism and the Public Sphere

Finally, the space for knowledge production in Africa is becoming more pluralistic. Universities, NGOs, media outlets, and grassroots movements are increasingly active in generating and circulating evidence. Social media has democratized access to data and amplified the voices of activists, citizen scientists, and informal research communities. For think tanks, this pluralism can be both a challenge and an opportunity. Competition for attention and legitimacy is fiercer, but partnerships with these emerging actors can expand reach and relevance. The most sustainable think tanks will be those that position themselves as conveners and integrators—able to bring together multiple sources of knowledge into coherent, policy-oriented analysis.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The sustainability of African think tanks has far-reaching implications for the continent's capacity to design, implement, and evaluate policies that can deliver on Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. The comparative analysis of CERAPE, CAMERCAP, KIPPRA, ESRF, and ZEPARI underscores that while think tanks play an indispensable role in providing evidence and shaping debates, they remain structurally fragile. The lessons drawn from their experiences suggest a set of policy implications and recommendations directed at governments, donors, and the think tanks themselves.

A first implication is that governments must recognize think tanks as public goods that contribute to national and regional development. Sustained investment in research and policy analysis is not a luxury but a prerequisite for informed governance. Yet the evidence shows that most African states devote less than 0.3 percent of GDP to research, well below the African Union target of one percent. Governments should therefore adopt legal and institutional frameworks that secure predictable funding for think tanks while safeguarding their independence. Mechanisms such as multi-year framework agreements, endowment contributions, or performance-based grants could provide the stability needed for long-term planning. Importantly, such frameworks must be designed to avoid politicization, ensuring that think tanks retain the autonomy necessary to provide candid advice.

A second implication concerns donors. While external funding has been vital in sustaining African think tanks, its short-term and project-driven nature often undermines institutional development. Donors should recalibrate their support to include a greater share of institutional grants, capacity-building investments, and multi-year funding commitments. At the same time, they should avoid crowding out domestic ownership. The transition from externally dependent models to blended financing will require dialogue among donors, governments, and think tank leaders to identify sustainable pathways. Supporting African philanthropic initiatives, corporate social responsibility programs, and innovative financing instruments can help diversify the funding base.

A third implication relates to capacity development. All five case studies highlight the importance of youth pipelines and training programs in renewing the research community. However, without strategies for retention and inclusion, such efforts risk becoming revolving doors. Think tanks should institutionalize youth and gender policies, ensure competitive remuneration packages where possible, and design career progression frameworks that reward excellence. Universities and think tanks must also deepen collaboration so that graduates are better prepared for the

demands of applied policy research. Investing in digital skills is increasingly critical, as big data analytics and artificial intelligence reshape the research landscape.

A fourth implication is the need to strengthen policy uptake. African think tanks continue to struggle with the uneven demand for evidence among policymakers, many of whom prefer international consultants. To overcome this bias, think tanks should invest in communication strategies that translate complex analysis into accessible formats such as policy briefs, infographics, and multimedia content. Regular dialogue platforms, co-production of research with ministries, and active participation in parliamentary hearings or budget processes can also increase visibility and relevance. Governments, for their part, should embed think tanks more systematically in national planning cycles, ensuring that evidence informs decisions at every stage.

A fifth implication relates to regional and continental collaboration. As the African Continental Free Trade Area and other Agenda 2063 priorities gather momentum, policy challenges increasingly transcend national borders. No single think tank, however capable, can provide all the evidence required. Strengthening regional platforms such as the Africa Think Tank Network (ATTN), convened by ACBF, is therefore essential. Such platforms can pool resources, harmonize methodologies, and amplify African voices in global debates. They can also help address disparities between Francophone and Anglophone think tanks by facilitating peer learning and joint projects.

Finally, the think tanks themselves must embrace innovation and adaptation. The cases demonstrate that sustainability is not static but dynamic, requiring constant recalibration. Independent institutions must continue to cultivate credibility and visibility; government-affiliated centers must safeguard space for independent analysis; and all think tanks must harness digital tools, expand youth and gender inclusion, and pursue diversified funding strategies. By doing so, they can position themselves

not merely as producers of knowledge but as conveners, bridge-builders, and trusted partners in Africa's transformation.

In conclusion, the policy implications and recommendations that emerge from this analysis highlight both the fragility and the potential of African think tanks. If governments, donors, and think tanks themselves act on these insights, the continent can build a resilient knowledge ecosystem capable of shaping policies that are evidence-based, inclusive, and responsive to Africa's development aspirations. The five case studies remind us that sustainability is a shared responsibility and that with deliberate action, think tanks can move from survival to leadership in driving Africa's future.

Chapter 4. Building lasting institutions with the right capacity

“Despite enormous efforts made in the post-independence period to build Africa’s human and institutional capacity, the lack of adequate capacity remains a critical constraint for economic growth, structural transformation and sustainable development that the Agenda 2063 enshrines” – (AU, 2015).

Introduction

Evaluations of Agenda 2063’s First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014–2023) conclude that, while the plan laid foundations, capacity constraints across multiple stakeholders, including at continental, regional and national levels, limited delivery against targets (AUC & AUDA-NEPAD, 2022, 2024). The end-term evaluation calls for strengthening implementation systems and re-assessing whether existing institutions are fit for purpose, a theme carried forward in the Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024–2033), prioritizing accelerated implementation and institutional capacity building. In parallel, sector analyses show that African think tanks remain essential to filling evidence and policy capacity gaps. Yet, they face persistent challenges, especially around stable funding, talent retention, political operating space, and digital capabilities, which must be addressed to enable them to play that role effectively (OTT, 2024, ACED, 2024).

African think tanks play a pivotal role in informing public policy and fostering good governance across the continent. However, many of these think tanks face serious capacity challenges that threaten their creation, effective management, and long-term sustainability. At the first Africa Think Tank Summit in 2014, the African Capacity Building Foundation warned that 30% of Africa's think tanks could close within a few years, and 60% were deemed "highly vulnerable" to disappearing due to unstable funding, staff turnover, and brain drain (ACBF, 2014). This concern remains highly relevant today. The 2024 "State of the Sector" report by On Think Tanks identifies four core challenges that continue to hinder think tank sustainability across the continent: funding, independence, capacity, and impact. Likewise, Africa-focused analyses emphasize that while think tanks have played a pivotal role in shifting the prevailing narrative from "permanent crisis" to "Africa rising" by offering evidence-based policy alternatives, they still grapple with systemic vulnerabilities that require urgent attention (Ngugi, 2021).

Socio-economic and political structures play critical roles in shaping continental, regional, and national development paths and results. Think tanks and the role they play need also to be considered within such contexts. Failure to anticipate social, economic, and political challenges will lead to unsuccessful policy planning, implementation and monitoring and evaluation where think tanks have an important role to play.

Given their importance in shaping public policy for growth and development, it is important to examine in more detail the capacity dimension associated with the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks in Africa for a number of reasons. *First*, a closer look at the capacity dimension will be helpful in understanding how these institutions operate. *Second*, an investigation of the capacity dimension in relation to think tanks can help better assist them when developing this dimension.

This chapter aims at shedding light on the capacity imperatives for the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks in Africa.

ACBF's framework for assessing the capacity challenges faced by think tanks

General overview and background

In the context of African countries, the African Capacity Building Foundation represents an authoritative source for assessing capacities in general and the capacity challenges faced by Africa's think tanks in particular. Since its establishment in 1991, the Foundation has catalyzed scalable change across the continent by investing in capacity building initiatives in the public and private sectors and civil society organizations. ACBF's framework for capacity needs assessment aims to identify capacity gaps through a rigorous analysis of the state of play and its comparison with the desired capacity, with the aim of recommending evidence-based interventions.

The Foundation defines capacity as *the “ability of people, organizations, and society as a whole to manage their affairs successfully and capacity development as the process by which people, organizations, and society as a whole unleash, strengthen, create, adapt, and maintain capacity over time”* (ACBF, 2014). Capacity is considered at three levels namely the enabling environment; the organizational level; and the individual level. The enabling environment refers to the background beyond the single organization. It describes the broader ecosystem within which individuals and organizations function, and one that facilitates or hampers their existence. The organizational level of capacity comprises the internal policies, arrangements, procedures, and frameworks that allow organizations to operate and deliver on their mandate and that enable the integration of

individual capacities to work together and achieve goals. The individual level refers to skills, experience, and knowledge that are vested in people (ACBF, 2011).

This is coherent with various approaches elaborated by donors, namely the Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) tool developed by different agencies in the development and donor community in the early 2000s (USAID, 2013). These also examine three elements, namely the technical capacity, the core capacity, and the enabling environment. Technology, particular knowledge, and tacit knowledge on the part of the organization are referred to as “technical capacity,” while the will, attitude, leadership, and management capabilities to activate technical capacity are referred to as “core capacity,” and serve as core elements for capacity. The systems, societies, and so on that underpin such capacities are referred to as the “enabling environment” that encompasses the organization.

The Africa Capacity Report (ACR) published yearly by ACBF since 2011, offers a framework for assessing capacities at the country level using various strategies. Four clusters are used to generate a set of sub-indices and a composite index of capacity that allows linkage to strategies and actions aimed at improving capacity in the sector (ACBF, 2011). (1) “Policy environment” refers to the conditions that must be in place to make development possible, with particular emphasis on effective and development-oriented organizations and institutional frameworks. (2) “Processes for implementation” is concerned with the creation of an environment that motivates and supports individuals; the capacity to manage relations with key stakeholders inclusively and constructively; and the capacity to establish appropriate frameworks for managing policies, strategies, programs, and projects. Equally important are processes for designing, implementing, and managing national development strategies to produce socially inclusive development outcomes. (3) “Development results at sector level” evaluates how institutional and human capacities translate into tangible development outcomes, measuring progress in sectors such as education,

health, agriculture, and infrastructure, and linking capacity strengths or gaps directly to national and regional development priorities. (4) “Knowledge Generation, Dissemination, and Utilization” examines a country’s ability to produce, share, and apply knowledge for policymaking, focusing on the role of think tanks, universities, statistical systems, and innovation in ensuring evidence-based decisions and sustainable development.

The ACBF framework

ACBF’s general framework for assessing the capacity challenges faced by think tanks was built on the model of Gieske, van Buuren, and Bekkers (2016). Besides considering the capacity of think tanks at the individual, organizational, and system levels, the proposed model considers the innovative aspects of think tanks, i.e., their connective capacity, their ambidextrous capacity, and their learning capacity, which are necessary for think tanks to successfully contribute to the implementation of Africa’s development agenda as well as ensure their relevance and sustainability.

Connective capacity refers to human, institutional, and societal skills and all related provisions that are needed to facilitate collaboration and establish and maintain meaningful and novel connections between actors and between content within and beyond think tanks. The concept of *ambidextrous capacity* represents the individual, organizational, and system-related abilities of an organization to combine both exploitation and exploration, improvement of existing routines or services based on existing knowledge, and to manage the paradoxes between improvement and innovation processes. *Learning capacity* can be defined as the ability of individuals, organizations, and societies to nurture an ongoing process of action and reflection through which knowledge is acquired, combined, and applied. It represents the way individuals, organizations, and societies are able to recognize, absorb, and use knowledge (Gieske et al., 2016).

Innovation is the implementation of a new or significantly improved product, process, organizational method, or marketing method that creates value for stakeholders and society (OECD, 2023). Its importance in the work of the think tanks has been discussed and is widely recognized by the think tank community in Africa and beyond. Practitioners and experts emphasize that, beyond developing innovative content, Africa's think tanks must also prioritize innovative external engagements and diverse, sustainable funding sources to effectively support the implementation of Agenda 2063. Moreover, African think tanks are being encouraged to shift toward self-reliant research strategies, fostering homegrown innovation amid declining traditional donor funding. Complementing this, On Think Tanks (2024) highlights the critical need for inclusive grantmaking that improves African researchers' access to funding by simplifying institutional barriers and diversifying resource streams.

Among these different aspects of capacity, the organizational one possesses its own tool, called the ACBF Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) tool, focusing on reviewing capacity at the organizational level. The tool is designed in such a way to support the capacity needs assessment of diverse organizations operating in different contexts, particularly think tanks. The main components of ACBF's OCA framework are as follows:

- ***Core functional areas (level 1):*** These are functions that are vital for the optimal performance of an organization. ACBF considers ten (10) functions that are fundamental to effective operations and successful organization.
- ***Sub-areas (level 2):*** These are sets of structure, policies, processes, systems, expertise, and other tools essential to ensuring the effective functioning of a core organizational function. There are 36 dimensions clustered around the 10 core functions.
- ***Assessment statements (level 3):*** These are the starting point of the assessment of the organizational capacity whereby some assumptions are considered under each sub-area linked to a given core function.

- ***Means of verification:*** These are the main sources of information against which the assumptions made under each sub-area are substantively checked for their validation.

A system of scoring and rating is applied through a 4-step process to ensure clarity and consistency in measuring the current state of the capacity of an organization. In addition, it would eventually enable comparative analysis among organizations that have gone through similar assessments. The finding of the assessment at a particular level is presented as a score varying from 1 to 5, following the results of the assessment conducted at the lower level as defined in the assessment framework. Then, a specific rating is assigned to each score as the conclusion of the assessment of the level.

To provide a visual representation of the ACBF Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) framework, Figure 3 illustrates the ten core organizational functions and their components, which are essential for evaluating the capacity challenges faced by African think tanks.

Figure 3. ACBF OCA framework: the ten organizational functions and their components

CORE ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONS (level1)	COMPONENTS (level2)
1  LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE	1.1. Organizational vision, mission, and core values 1.2. Organizational structure 1.3. Governance system 1.4. Leadership change management 1.5. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
2  HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT	2.1. Staff Manual 2.2. Expertise in human resource management
3  RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT	3.1. Knowledge management strategy 3.2. Expertise in knowledge management 3.3. Research program management
4  COMMUNICATION	4.1. Communication strategy 4.2. Expertise in communication
5  INFRASTRUCTURE	5.1. Office 5.2. IT system 5.3. Office facilities management system
6  FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT	6.1. Accounting system 6.2. Financial control system 6.3. Expertise in Financial Management 6.4. Budgeting process management 6.5. Auditing and internal control 6.6. Procurement 6.7. Risk register book
7  STRATEGIC PLANNING AND INNOVATION	7.1. Strategic planning policy 7.2. Expertise in strategic planning 7.3. Innovation practice
8  RESOURCE MOBILIZATION AND PARTNERSHIPS	8.1. Resource mobilization strategy 8.2. Expertise in resource mobilization 8.3. Partnerships policy 8.4. Expertise in partnership
9  PROGRAM MANAGEMENT	9.1. Program Planning and Implementation 9.2. Expertise in program management 9.3. Operational planning 9.4. Progress reporting
10  RESULTS MANAGEMENT AND QUALITY ASSURANCE	10.1. M&E system 10.2. Expertise in M&E 10.3. Quality assurance and risk management

Source: ACBF

Current challenges related to the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks

The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) has recently conducted an assessment of 12 think tanks across sub-Saharan Africa (ACBF, 2025), under the Capacity Development for Africa's Structural Transformation (CADAST) Project funded by AfDB.

The exercise began with consultations with each of the targeted think tanks. Based on these discussions, ACBF's technical team adapted its Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) Matrix to fit the specific context of the assignment. Each think tank then self-administered the customized tool. The assessment covered 107 criteria across 10 organizational functions, with clarifications requested where necessary to ensure accuracy. Once the matrices were submitted, ACBF's team reviewed them for quality, checking scores and justifications against other available sources. The results were then compiled and rated, and a consolidated report of the key findings was produced. The draft report was presented in validation sessions with all participating think tanks. These workshops helped verify data quality and resolve discrepancies. A final report was then produced. Finally, based on the assessment results, priority capacity development initiatives were identified, taking into account available resources and the timeline of the CADAST project.

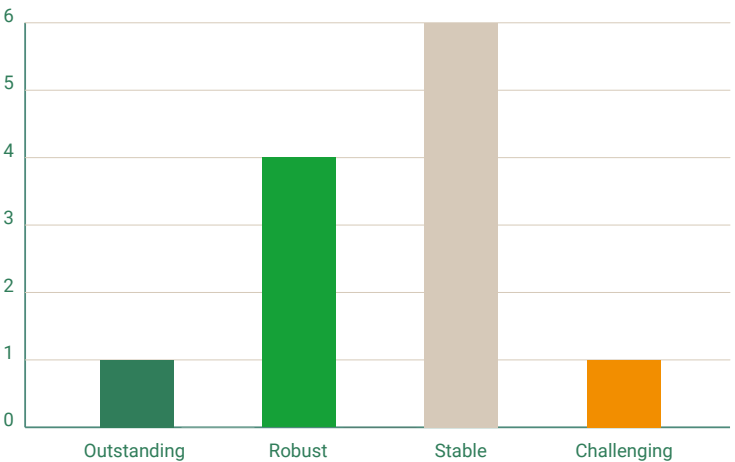
Most pressing Challenges identified by the study

The assessment revealed significant variation in the organizational capacities of the target think tanks. While some institutions exhibited strong performance across several core functions, others showed considerable gaps requiring targeted improvement. These disparities were clearly reflected in the assessment scores and ratings, which measured the effectiveness of each think tank's organizational setup. Performance levels were closely tied to the presence—or absence—of robust structures,

policies, procedures, and tools designed to support institutional effectiveness and long-term sustainability.

The findings of the assessment, as illustrated in Figure 4, highlight the results of the think tank evaluation under the CADAST framework, showcasing the variations in organizational capacities and identifying specific areas where targeted improvements are necessary.

Figure 4. Results of the think tank assessment under CADAST



Source: OCA of think tanks under CADAST – ACBF

The main challenges identified through this assessment were the following.

Research and Knowledge Management

Although many institutions produce quality research outputs, they often lack systematic strategies for storing, organizing, and disseminating knowledge. Weak or fragmented data systems

mean that valuable institutional memory is frequently lost when staff transition, and limited technical expertise reduces the ability to use digital tools for evidence synthesis and sharing. Without comprehensive knowledge management frameworks, think tanks struggle to fully leverage their research, diminishing their capacity to inform policy processes in a consistent and impactful way.

For instance, KIPPRA in Kenya was highlighted for its well-structured data and knowledge management practices, which ensure institutional memory and facilitate evidence-based policy engagement. Similarly, ZIPAR in Zambia has made progress in building internal processes to catalogue and disseminate research, showing that robust knowledge systems are achievable and can significantly enhance policy influence.

Results Management and Quality Assurance

The assessment also revealed shortcomings in results management and quality assurance systems. Several think tanks lack robust monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, making it difficult to systematically measure and demonstrate policy influence or organizational effectiveness. Even when evaluations exist, they are often ad hoc and not embedded in an institution-wide quality assurance process. The absence of standardized mechanisms to validate research outputs and track outcomes over time undermines credibility and weakens accountability to stakeholders, including governments, donors, and the public.

For example, KIPPRA in Kenya and ESRF in Tanzania were noted for having embedded monitoring and evaluation frameworks that allowed them to track the impact of their work and maintain research quality standards. These systems enabled them to report to funders and policymakers with confidence, strengthening their reputation and accountability.

Resource Mobilization and Partnerships

A further area of concern is resource mobilization and the management of partnerships. Many think tanks remain heavily reliant on a narrow pool of donors, leaving them vulnerable to funding volatility and shifts in donor priorities. Few institutions have comprehensive partnership policies or long-term fundraising strategies that could diversify their income base. This overdependence not only undermines financial sustainability but also constrains institutional independence. Strengthening resource mobilization capacities and cultivating strategic partnerships is therefore essential for long-term resilience and policy relevance.

For example, CEPOD in Senegal and IPAR in Rwanda stood out for their ability to secure partnerships not only with donors but also with national governments and regional institutions. This has enhanced their financial sustainability while embedding them more firmly in policy processes.

Communication and Strategic Planning

Finally, weaknesses in communication and strategic planning were observed in several institutions. A number of think tanks lack coherent communication strategies to effectively disseminate their research to policymakers, media, and the public. This limits the visibility of their work and reduces opportunities to shape policy debates. Similarly, gaps in strategic planning make it challenging to align organizational activities with national and continental priorities, or to adapt to shifting policy environments. Without strong communication and planning capacities, think tanks risk remaining reactive rather than proactive players in policy development.

For instance, ESRF in Tanzania and IPAR Rwanda were noted for their proactive communication strategies, which allow them to reach policymakers, the media, and the public more effectively. KIPPRA again emerged as a leader, with a clear strategic plan

that aligns institutional priorities with Kenya's Vision 2030 and the African Union's Agenda 2063.

How can think tanks address their most prevalent challenges

Think tanks in Africa are under increasing pressure to adapt to the new Africa's transformational agenda and deliver on their mandate in terms of policy research, advocacy, and advice. They therefore need to address the key challenges by ensuring a very high level of flexibility in the management of their human, financial, and physical assets.

Adapting to the context

To address the key capacity challenges associated with the creation of think tanks in Africa, attention should be paid to the context, the buy-in of key stakeholders, and the fit-for-purpose institutional arrangement.

Having a good understanding of the context within which the think tank is created through a systematic and data-driven country assessment is a key step. Varied political, social, and economic environments in Africa require a clear and methodical understanding of a country's ability to facilitate the success of think tanks. Moreover, the national demand for policy research must be understood via customized approaches that are reliant on a deep understanding of the country's culture and context.

Key socio-economic, political, and environmental indicators can play a crucial role in this analysis, potentially leading to the development of "viability scores." These scores can help shape capacity development approaches across the policy impact value chain, leveraging each country's strengths and implementing risk mitigation strategies in those deemed "less viable." The context of each country should guide the focus of the think tank being created, as well as the strategies for managing risks, to effectively

navigate the complex and changing environments in which think tanks operate.

Such country need assessments will also pay close attention to the knowledge and research gaps existing in and on the country, and justify the establishment of a think tank. That is to say that the niche of the think tank has to be clearly determined, highlighting the existence of a real demand for policy research, advocacy, and advice to be met by the think tank. At this stage, it is important to identify what kind of policy reforms are needed, what the government's priorities are, and what kind of analysis or capacity is needed to inform such priorities (Ayotan, 2023; Mbadlanyana, 2024).

Ensuring stakeholder ownership in a participatory process

The successful creation of a think tank depends on whether the key stakeholders, clients, and partners have been involved right from the get-go in the definition of the focus areas, approaches, and impacts. The participatory process is to be used as a phase to identify needs, but also an opportunity to map the needs to the intended goals for effective policy impact. The process also represents an opportunity to confirm the country's appetite for policy change and policy advice. This approach will involve the stakeholders through a participatory process involving actors across the ecosystem, while providing an opportunity to identify weaknesses that will require direct or indirect support (ACBF, AUC, ECA & NEPAD, 2016; OTT, 2024).

A well-executed, participatory, and goal-oriented process can help the future think tank gain the political and financial support it needs. By inviting key stakeholders, including policymakers, to help define and design the think tank's focus, political considerations can be effectively addressed. This approach also allows the think tank to benefit from the valuable knowledge that policymakers and other stakeholders bring, helping to avoid

lengthy trial-and-error phases and potentially securing resources for the organization.

Defining the institutional arrangements and processes

Now that the focus areas are defined and key stakeholders are on board, the next crucial step is to establish an appropriate institutional arrangement for the think tank to effectively fulfill its mandate and objectives. This arrangement should be comprehensive and align with the think tank's business model, which includes its value proposition, core activities, governance structure, funding model, leadership, staffing, financial management, and communication strategy.

The institutional arrangement to be adopted will depend on the affiliation of the think tank: whether it is an independent civil society think tank established as a non-profit organization; a policy research institute located in or affiliated with a university; a government-created or state-sponsored think tank; a corporate-created or business-affiliated think tank; or a political party (or candidate) think tank (Stone, 2005; OTT, 2024). While the nature of the think tank will largely determine its governance structure, good practices in African contexts generally include the establishment of a board of trustees, a management team, and both research and non-research staff. The board of trustees—or board of governors—should be as inclusive as possible, comprising government officials, representatives from the private sector, academia, and civil society, all with the capacity to provide strategic leadership and oversight to the executive management. Ideally, the board should represent a range of skills and experiences, show a strong interest in the think tank's areas of work, maintain constructive relations with the staff, and demonstrate clear leadership capabilities. The executive team should possess the experience, skills, and competence required by the complexity of its role, and demonstrate a clear understanding of its responsibilities and accountability to the board.

The specific structure and governing body of the think tank depend on its legal form, internal organization, and the laws of the country in which it operates. Regardless of the chosen institutional arrangement, it is essential for think tanks to clearly define the roles within their governance structure, including the board of governors, the executive director, management, and both research and non-research staff. Without this clarity, decision-making authority may be misallocated, compromising strategic direction and operational effectiveness. Governance structures should reflect the organization's values and mission, ensuring a positive relationship between the board and management to promote institutional resilience. Additionally, improved management practices, such as fostering strong team leadership and effective board engagement, are crucial for long-term sustainability (ACBF, 2018).

In relation to and beyond the effective organizational structure, a concerted and planned effort is needed to ensure that all interconnected parts of the organization are aligned strategically to achieve the mission and goals set for the think tank. Recent insights from the McKinsey 7-S Model (2024) reaffirm that effectiveness arises from aligning structure, strategy, systems, skills, staff, style, and shared values, showing how misalignment in any area can weaken overall performance. Meanwhile, Forbes (2023) highlights that leadership and cultural alignment—the “why behind organizational goals and the values that guide behaviors”—drive growth, cohesion, and engagement. Together, these new perspectives reinforce that all organizational components must work in harmony to achieve meaningful results.

It is critical to develop and implement broad institutional policies that would provide a streamlined governance framework within the think tanks. Policies are very useful governance instruments that provide all organizational participants, whether internal or external, with the guidelines necessary for patterning intra- and extra-organizational behavioral activities. Policy statements are to be developed in such important areas as recruitment of staff, control procedures, monitoring, succession and communication

processes, inter alia. Indeed, think tanks must design, develop, and ensure implementation of policies that govern the full scope of their operations. This responsibility includes guiding management to develop and implement appropriate policies across all layers, from governance and research integrity to human resources and transparency. Clarity in policy frameworks within think tanks is vital for maintaining credibility, enabling coherent action, and safeguarding independence in an era of increasing digitalization and political complexity (McGann, 2020).

Acquiring the necessary human resources

More recent analyses (McGann, 2020; OTT, 2017) build on Struyk's earlier work by documenting contemporary management practices in think tanks and highlighting pathways for improvement, particularly in governance, staff development, innovation, and accountability. Think tanks must systematically design, develop, and enforce internal policies that govern all aspects of their operations: governance structures, HR, research ethics, transparency, and accountability, with management playing a central role in ensuring these policies are applied effectively across the organization. Recent sector-wide studies underscore that such policy frameworks are foundational to resilience and impact, especially in environments marked by political uncertainties, donor volatility, and digital transformation (ACBF, 2018, GAH, 2024; OTT, 2025).

Ensuring the availability of human resources means hiring and retaining qualified staff, including the leadership, the management team, the research team, and non-research staff (finance and administration). Staff involved in the whole value chain for the effective functioning of the think tank is critical. Recent studies confirm that this issue remains a critical challenge. According to the On Think Tanks State of the Sector Report 2024, over 40% of African think tanks cite difficulties attracting and retaining skilled researchers. Many institutions also report that limited core funding contributes to staff turnover, weak institutional memory,

and reliance on consultants unfamiliar with the local context (OTT, 2024a; 2024b).

The *leadership* attribute, which entitles clear vision, flexibility, good communication, and innovation skills, is as important as the other resources required for good management of think tanks in Africa (Struyk, 2006). Visionary leaders are expected to be able to imagine different roles for the success of their think tank while being able to attract different types of talent to the organization as a means of accomplishing new objectives. Flexibility in the leadership implies having a flexible operating style and interest by being open to seeing different possibilities for the think tank – which is vital especially the new dynamics and the shifts occurring in the African economy. Besides, communication is taken seriously by good leaders; they communicate regularly with the staff to ensure that all employees are aware of the innovations being pursued and how those fit into plans for the long-run development of the think tank. Moreover, an innovative leader, who may or may not be the person who creates the idea behind an innovation but recognizes a great idea and envisions the path that leads to that idea's becoming a reality, is critical for the effective management of think tanks in Africa (ACBF, 2017; 2018).

The *management team* has a significant influence on the outcomes of the think tank. Indeed, the top management team guides the organization and provides an example for all employees to follow, which amplifies the importance of their actions. It is therefore critical for the team to demonstrate behavioral flexibility and adopt transformational and charismatic leadership styles while maintaining a high level of cohesion. In selecting the team, attention should be paid to members' attributes, including diversity, and opportunities should be provided to foster trust and build cohesion within the group. The critical elements and enabling factors of an effective management team include clear goals, decision-making authority, accountability and responsibility, effective leadership, training and development, adequate resources, organizational support, and recognition or rewards for team success (Harvey et al, 1998; OTT, 2023).

The *research team*, viewed as comprising a group of people working together in a committed way towards a common research goal, is an important, if not the most critical, component for the think tank to successfully deliver on its mandate. For the research team to be effective is to have members who support each other, share information, and communicate well, foster psychological safety and collaborative culture (Edmondson, 2019; OECD, 2023). The research team needs to be as complete as possible; the balance and composition of the team in terms of skills, expertise and other contributions is crucial for the institution to achieve its objectives. An incomplete core staff leads to a dependency on external consultants that further delay research outputs as they spend a significant amount of time to get familiar with the nature of the work and country context.

The *non-research staff*, sometimes called the support staff, plays an equally important role in the successful delivery of the think tanks' objectives. If the effectiveness are insufficient (i.e., operations, administrative and research) or there is a mismatch between their qualifications and the institution's needs, researchers might be inundated with program management and administrative processes, rather than undertaking research activities.

Securing adequate financial resources

Financial sustainability calls for innovative ways in mobilizing resources and diversifying the sources of funding. The extent to which think tanks should pay attention to core funding, project funding, and income from revenue generating activities depends on the maturity of the institution.

Long-term core funding, based on and using ACBF experience, has been highly effective and has delivered value for money. ACBF has fulfilled an important role in nurturing young think tanks through close supervision and hands-on support. The results and influence that think tanks delivered show that ACBF's long-term core support pays off and leverages broader impact as well as resources and their sources due to reduced risk with each

successive phase. Most of the ACBF partners were well chosen, with a perspective of the potential influence they can have, and usually at a time where no other donors or partners were interested in supporting them. Support to new or emerging organizations involves taking risks but offers potential for substantial impact in the long run.

The fact that ACBF has been supporting young and promising organizations has often encouraged other partners and donors to join in with their support. ACBF's support gives confidence to other donors and partners to provide support it has been building basic capacity to receive and handle funding partnerships. With core funding, think tanks have usually been able to follow through their own priorities and agenda. This was generally seen as an empowering experience, adding to the confidence of think tanks (Dalberg Global Development Partners, 2013).

Recently, the ability of donors and partners to adequately support think tanks in Africa and other regions has diminished. Funding gaps have in turn impacted on the effectiveness of think tanks, particularly around their ability to meet programmatic expectations. The mobilization of financial resources has become a critical challenge for think tanks as discussed during all Africa think tank summits. The main recommendations that arouse are around diversifying the sources of funding, having a clear value proposition, including developing innovative marketing strategies, and collaborating with other institutions.

The *diversification of funding sources* can include reaching out to African corporations and philanthropists, using networks of think tank boards and trustees to reach out to individual donors and partners, increasingly reaching out to social entrepreneurs, and avoiding those donors who traditionally monopolize regional think tank funding. Moreover, participants agreed that institutions should also consider ways to include donors and partners in the implementation of the organization's mission and should engage them by bringing them for periodic meetings where corporations, wealthy individuals and Foundations discuss policy issues and

the work that think tanks are doing to address the region's most pressing policy issues.

To mobilize more financial resources and survive, the think tanks should clearly *establish their value proposition*, to demonstrate their relevance and value, particularly with respect to their alignment with national priorities. A clear value proposition can demonstrate to potential funding agencies the benefits of providing support. For effective marketing, think tanks need to maintain a good profile and clearly understand their competitive advantage. It is recommended to develop innovative marketing strategies to increase visibility, taking assistance from professional branding or marketing agencies if needed. It is equally important for think tanks to continually scanning the environment so as to be able to predict changes that would call for adaptation in order to remain relevant and in demand.

The various Africa think tank summits also recommended think tanks to *increase collaboration by networking*. ACBF has created and is hosting the Africa Think Tank Network is also urged to upgrade the platform in order to further promote networking through its Think Tank networking platform and its development of an African think tank database.

Ensuring impactful results and innovation

Think tanks' leadership should play a central role in monitoring the institution's performance for several reasons.

Documentation and communication of achievements and lessons learnt are imperative to achieve organizational effectiveness and visibility. Think tanks need to document and publicize their success stories as well as lessons learnt. This would help improve internal knowledge base and produce evidence-based results that are so important to secure continued donors and partners' support. It is also imperative to develop and implement a communication strategy to improve visibility of the organization, and to generate new businesses and revenues.

The role of knowledge management and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) that clearly attributes impact is therefore important for think tanks. Given the range and types of donors and partners think tanks have, and the presence of multiple donor and development organizations supporting policy research and reform, impact attribution becomes extremely difficult. As such, think tanks would need to clearly articulate M&E indicators and implement tracking systems, to increase their ability in demonstrating results and impacts.

Working towards sustainability

Much in line with what has been described earlier, recommendations related to the sustainability of think tanks can also be classified into financial and non-financial dimensions and itemized around (1) value proposition, (2) efficiency and transparency, (3) innovative marketing and communication, (4) diversification of funding sources, and (5) partnership and collaboration (ACBF, AUC, ECA & NEPAD, 2016).

Table 3 presents the recommendations and initiatives proposed by the African think tank community along the financial and non-financial aspects. The *value proposition* means that think tanks should play a unique role in offering quality, timely and relevant research, analysis and advice while contributing to the efficient monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the various local, national, regional, continental and global development agendas. In terms of *efficiency and transparency*, think tanks should maintain their recognition with respect to their independence, efficiency and transparency, while supporting national, regional, continental and global agendas through sound financial management systems and tools as well as regular audits and controls (ACBF, AUC, ECA & NEPAD, 2016).

Table 3. Key elements for the sustainability of think tanks

Key elements	Financial	Non-financial
(1) Value proposition		Credibility and independence as well as transparency and accountability of the think tanks High quality of knowledge products evidence-based policy capacity building Demand driven approach identify key stakeholders and customers define value propositions for each
(2) Efficiency and transparency	Financial management systems and tools Regular audits and controls Economies of scale (i.e. common procurement for many think tanks)	Harnessing of advanced technologies to cut costs
(3) Innovative marketing and communication		regular dissemination of knowledge products to policy makers, private sector, civil society, etc. media outreach social media communication of value proposition to relevant stakeholders at various forums
(4) Diversification of funding sources	African governments, institutions and other beneficiaries non-traditional funding partners private sector, philanthropists, Southern partners (BRICS, etc.) crowd funding endowment funds	
(5) Partnership and collaboration		Synergy across think tanks Development of think tanks mapping Exploit African Think Tank Network launched by ACBF

Source: ACBF, AUC, ECA & NEPAD, 2016

To ensure their sustainability, think tanks can also use *innovative marketing and communication* strategies by using new technologies and social media while strengthening the communication of the value proposition to relevant stakeholders at various forums. Equally important is the *diversification of funding sources*, which means that clear and effective communication should be done for non-traditional funding partners and the private sector to understand the value addition by think tanks and therefore support the various initiatives and interventions. Moreover, partnership and collaboration remain critical for the sustainability of think tanks; networking will help think tanks to better maximize their limited resources, attract more resources, more effectively disseminate expertise throughout the think tank community, and reach a larger audience.

Conclusion and recommendations

Policymakers and development practitioners are increasingly aware of the role that think tanks play in shaping countries' development paths and results. Recognition of their importance and potential contribution has prompted state and non-state actors to explicitly build partnerships with think tanks for policy research, advice, and/or advocacy. This increasing recognition, together with the increasing number of think tanks, poses some challenges when it comes to the creation, management, and sustainability of the organization.

In line with Africa's development agenda, think tanks can also contribute to building the capacity in essentially pursuing three key goals, namely enhancing skills of individuals and groups; enhancing or improving enabling environments; designing or improving systems, processes, institutional structures, and modes of operation to achieve better outcomes and effectiveness (ACBF & AUC, 2016). It is highly necessary to support capacity development programs in which think tanks play a critical role as capacity building actors. However, the effective support

for capacity development programs needs to be provided by providing financial and political support to Africa-based capacity building institutions with the required mandate and extensive experience in the field. Capacity development priorities should hence include institutional development and mechanisms for delivering development services across the continent, as well as making the continent's institutions operationally more effective and efficient.

Support of capacity building initiatives should be adapted to the context. African countries need to be responsible for agenda setting and process design, implementation, and monitoring while ensuring that the interventions have legitimacy and ownership. For development partners, the focus needs to be on supporting African countries' agendas and contributing to strengthening, or effective utilization, of local capacities; and encouraging ongoing learning and longer-term commitments to capacity development initiatives.

For effective support to capacity development programs, Africa-based capacity building institutions with the mandate and long experience in the field, and a good understanding of the African context, need to coordinate the efforts and interventions for effectiveness and better resource management. ACBF, exclusively created to build human and institutional capacity in Africa, can and should play such a coordinating role to help coordinate the capacity building efforts and interventions and pool the resources for great efficiency and effectiveness.

Chapter 5. Knowledge supply and demand, or the financial conundrum

“We all believe in this mantra around evidence and the likelihood that good evidence, produced and generated and then pushed into policymaking in certain ways, is more likely to result in better policy.”— Peter da Costa, as cited in Mendizabal, 2018

The chapter provides an independent perspective from a knowledge sector expert engaged in the study of how evidence informs and influences policy and its implementation, with particular reference to Africa. Chapter 5 (initial draft) stands as a poignant testament to the late Peter K.A. da Costa of the Hewlett Foundation, Kenya, who crafted this chapter with great care and passion before his passing, leaving an indelible mark on this book.

Growing demand for problem-solving knowledge

Based on the available data, two conclusions can be drawn with a reasonable degree of confidence. One is that think-tanking is gaining currency in Africa. The other is that the think tank ecosystem is some way away from achieving anything like critical mass (OTT, 2024c). The question naturally arises as to the contextual factors behind the emergence of think tanks in Africa today. What accounts for the growth in the number of think

tanks that has been observed? Why is policy-relevant research considered so important? And what are the hurdles?

The contextual factors shaping demand

In large part, the demand for think-tanking in Africa is fueled by the bullish performance of African economies, the recognition that externally developed and imposed solutions have not always had the desired impact, and the need for prospective research, analysis, and policy engagement to drive African transformation.

Between 2000 and 2014, African economies grew at an average of 5 percent a year, with some countries exhibiting double-digit growth. Much of this growth was driven by the commodity boom, with the extractive industries accounting for a significant share of the dividend.

Other positive indicators included sizable increases in numbers of children in school, with primary net enrollment up from 58 percent in 1999 to 79 percent in 2024 in sub-Saharan Africa (UNSD, 2025). At the same time, health outcomes have seen substantial progress: under-five mortality rates declined by about 35 percent and neonatal death rates by around 21 percent over the last decade (WHO, 2022), and maternal mortality dropped from 727 to 442 deaths per 100,000 live births between 2000 and 2023 in the African region (WHO, 2025). Life expectancy and health-adjusted life expectancy have both improved, with healthy life expectancy increasing by nearly 10 years from 2000 to 2019 (WHO, 2022).

However, Africa's growth decreased since 2014, due to different financial crises and the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 1). Aid from traditional donors has continued to decline, and non-traditional donors – including the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) led by China, as well as private philanthropy – have emerged, offering a range of new products

to African countries looking to finance their growth and transformation plans, particularly in infrastructure.

At the same time, there is a growing expectation that domestic resources, primarily from taxes, will eventually provide the lion's share of development financing. The African Development Bank, in its 2025 Economic Outlook, reported that Africa loses over US\$ 587 billion annually to capital flight, primarily driven by corruption, illicit financial flows, and heightened risk premiums tied to misperceived political and economic risk (AfDB, 2025). This assertion has provided powerful evidence to back those arguing that if only it could manage its bountiful resource endowment properly, Africa could finance the lion's share of its own development.

Old, new, and emerging challenges are also adding to the complexity of Africa's political economy. Roughly half of Africa's population lives in countries where governance has deteriorated between 2014 and 2023, often linked to worsening security (Ibrahim Index, 2023). Governance issues loom large, manifested by advances in democracy on the one hand, juxtaposed with 'third termism' and efforts by long-standing regimes to remain in power on the other. Conflict persists and intensifies in South Sudan, Burundi, DR Congo, and elsewhere, while radicalization threatens stability in several countries in North Africa, West Africa, Eastern Africa, and the Horn of Africa. Driven by these conflicts, as well as by climate change that is threatening livelihoods, thousands of Africans are risking their lives to cross deserts and oceans in search of peace, security, and a better life.

In response to the existential threats of the 21st century, new and emerging global and continental frameworks are redefining Africa's development thinking and strategies. Nations of the world have come together to agree on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Paris Climate Agreement, and other related goals on Education for All, Energy, and so on. At the continental level, Agenda 2063 provides the blueprint for "The Africa We Want". Within African countries, policy makers and planners grapple

with the imperative of integrating these global and continental goals with their own home-grown national development strategies.

These competing demands are bringing to the fore a tension that has long existed – how much energy African policy makers should spend delivering locally-relevant goals, as opposed to accounting upwards to contribute to global goals. As the SDG focus falls squarely on ‘domesticating’ the 17 goals and agreeing on relevant targets and indicators for each country, this tension is only likely to become more acute.

The challenge of how to “Leave no One Behind” while pursuing “Structural Transformation” and “Creating Wealth” looms large. Now, more than ever, policy makers want to know how they can account to their domestic and international constituents. All the challenges outlined above require data, information, and research evidence to inform policy, ensure policies are implemented, and evaluate the impact of policy initiatives.

Most of the challenges outlined affect large numbers of countries to differing degrees, so collaboration across countries and globally can, in many instances, be key to finding solutions. At the same time, many challenges are context-specific and are best grappled with by local actors who understand the terrain best.

This is partly where the demand for home-grown in-depth research, analysis, and innovative solutions is emanating from. This demand has given rise to a proliferation of PROs, configured in diverse ways, all seeking to solve problems and bring about more fundamental change. Today, there is significantly greater capacity to contend with the problems of the present and future than at any time in the past.

Not everyone agrees that there is significant local demand for African think tanks. According to some, the rise of African think tanks could be seen as a “defensive strategy”, in the sense that local expertise gives African countries a stronger hand in their engagement with the international community. Indeed, African

governments and international development partners keep repeating that local think tanks are more likely to be useful in helping governments solve immediate problems, as well as in planning longer-term transformation, than external expertise. This refrain emanates from the relative lack of success of decades of externally driven development.

The question arises: beyond the defensive motives, how much real ‘local’ demand is there for think tanks and evidence informed policymaking in Africa? Can local demand rise to fill the gap as the defensive motive declines over time? It appears that there are many problems to be solved and many potential solutions that African governments are not fully drawing on local think tanks to help provide.

What do policymakers and funders want?

So, what exactly is it that African policy makers and their international development partners actually want from think tanks?

Over time, there has been a clear demand for think tanks from African governments experiencing capacity shortfalls in technical subject areas related to the economy. This demand intensified in the late 1980s – resulting in the establishment of the ACBF and a host of think tanks. So, what else do we know about the nature of demand for the output of Africa’s think tanks today?

A recent World Bank study (WB, 2022) highlights several core expectations. First, policy actors value rigorous, impartial research that contributes to strategic policy processes and counters misinformation. By grounding decisions in empirical evidence, think tanks contribute to the legitimacy and credibility of policy processes. Second, think tanks are valued for their stakeholder engagement, helping to broaden and legitimize policy discussions. They act as connectors, facilitating two-way interaction among policymakers, researchers, donors, and civil

society stakeholders. Third, policymakers face systemic technical and institutional limitations. Think tanks can bridge those gaps by providing targeted capacity-building, technical assistance, and sustained support.

This trend might turn, as experiences elsewhere in the world show that governments, as they become more professionalized and hire more technocrats, tend to turn to internal expertise, as opposed to external think tanks, to inform policy and solve problems. National think tanks need to be aware of this phenomenon, and in instances where governments are the largest potential or actual consumers of research evidence, need to do better in dissemination, policy engagement, and partnerships if they are to stimulate increased demand.

Many African think tanks remain heavily dependent on short-term, project-based international funding, which undermines institutional stability and research independence. This form of funding restricts their ability to build long-term core capacities (OTT, 2024). This is a simple fact of life in the aid business – funders have preferred sectors they want to support, specific countries they cover, and particular expectations in terms of the kinds of results they are looking for.

Additionally, the results orientation is driven by the need for proof that a given donor-funded intervention worked. Thus, there is a growing demand from non-governmental funders, including private philanthropic foundations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for better evidence that particular interventions have the desired impact. This has spread to the bilateral and multilateral donor community, and in the process led to the creation and growth of a veritable industry of impact assessment.

Think tanking does not immediately yield ‘Impact Stories’ of the kind that satisfy politicians or funders who want results now. This will continue to further constrain the already shrinking resource

pool available for think tanks, whether from traditional donors or newer sources.

Demand will therefore vary depending on domestic donor politics and will rest on what topics are ‘hot’. These include climate change, agriculture, health systems, rigorous impact evaluation (RCTs), and research in specific geographies, for example, ‘countries emerging from conflict’ – which are now a major priority for multilateral development banks. Beyond the SDGs discourse, we should also expect a lot of the demand from outside Africa, as well as within Africa, to be shaped by other dynamics – such as the BRICS narrative and South-South and Triangular cooperation.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the challenge here is that many of the think tanks in Africa do not have the specialist expertise to meet certain donor preferences, and this hampers their sustainability. This raises an even more fundamental ‘supply-side’ challenge that is not being addressed in any systematic way. While there is a renewed interest in supporting the tertiary education sector, and in particular in incubating a new generation of public policy scholars, most funders prefer to support projects and programs, rather than invest in building the capacity of the knowledge sector across the board.

This leaves African think tanks with no choice but to figure out how to navigate what is an agenda-laden terrain and manage the trade-offs in such a way as to ensure they can produce credible research that impacts positively in their respective contexts – as opposed to simply satisfying the demands of their governments and external funders.

How do African think tanks assess their impact?

An important evolution in the past decade or so is that development is now widely understood not only as a series of discrete activities or projects, but rather as a large, complex enterprise involving

donors, partner countries and other stakeholders – including think tanks. The discourse has thus shifted from a focus on how aid money is managed (aid effectiveness) how to ensure the best possible outcomes (development effectiveness).

This evolution poses considerable challenges to those seeking to attribute success to any individual actor. In the past, the input of an aid agency or arm of government to specific public goods could be easily identified and cited as an indicator of success. Attribution is considerably more challenging in today's environment, with the increasing number of actors and with the focus having shifted from output to long-run impact (OECD, 2023).

Donors can no longer get away with flying their national flags or giving prominence to their logos. Recipient governments are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the long-term sustainable impact of their interventions, whether externally or domestically funded. Independent organizations, including aid-dependent think tanks, are under the most pressure, since they generate knowledge whose contribution and impact are harder to measure, as opposed to roads, hospitals, or schools, which can be more easily counted.

Sources agree that it is extremely difficult to attribute impact in any context to a given think tank or group of think tanks. Recent advances indicate that while citation metrics can serve as indirect proxies for influence in specific domains, they remain imperfect for attributing overall impact to individual organizations (Szomszor & Adie, 2022). Moreover, ongoing debates in advocacy and policy influencing emphasize that the complex, multi-actor nature of policymaking environments requires approaches focused on contribution rather than attribution (Jones, 2024).

One new approach currently being piloted by policy influence evaluators is a combination of contribution analysis, a widely-used evaluation approach, with process tracking, an emerging method for inferring causality that draws on historical analysis, and Bayesian Updating, a method used to measure confidence

in a claim about cause and effect (cf. Befani & Mayne, 2014). More recently, this evolved methodology, typically referred to as Contribution Tracing, has been successfully applied in practice. Additionally, Collaborative Impact's 2023 framework elaborates on a rigorous Contribution Tracing process that combines process tracing and contribution analysis, with comprehensive evidence cross-checking and a progressive rating of evidence strength to gauge systemic influence (Collaborative Impact, 2023).

In recent years, African think tanks have dramatically improved their ability to engage and communicate with policy makers. The driver for this increased outward orientation has been the need to impact concretely on policy and practice, as well as the necessity of being more visible in order to attract more demand and more resources. However, it is highly unlikely that African think tanks, as currently constituted, possess the expertise in-house to embrace such complex and labor-intensive techniques.

In the absence of a 'silver bullet' evaluation method, the Most Significant Change (MSC) approach is proving a popular means of bolstering think tank claims that they contributed to certain development policy or practice outcomes. Nevertheless, there are methodological challenges associated with the MSC approach. Policy influence is seldom direct and attributable; the pathways are often circuitous, and influence often works precisely because it is undercover or back-door. Making such information public can often work against the desired outcome of the think tank, erode trust among policy makers, and close off avenues for future influence via similar informal channels. As such, many powerful stories of influence can never formally be shared.

Lessons from financial support to African think tanks

Investment dynamics

The first point to note is that it is extremely difficult to pin down with any degree of accuracy how much financial support goes to think tanks in Africa. This is partly because the knowledge sector extends far beyond the members of the ecosystem of think tanks discussed so far, to include higher education research, international research consortia that involve research-to-policy components, support to specific institutions in countries responsible for building research capacity, support to particular engagement and advocacy initiatives, sector-based support to single-issue organizations, and so on.

A related consideration is that the supporters of think tanking, broadly defined, range from bilateral and multilateral development cooperation funders to private philanthropy, including political foundations, international NGOs, Southern governments, and corporate social responsibility foundations. Many of these funders do not have consolidated, dedicated pools of funding for think tanks, and this makes it all the more challenging to follow the money from supplier to recipient.

The funding dynamics for think tanks in Africa have shifted over the past decade. International donor funding continues to be the main source of support, often in the form of short-term, project-based initiatives. However, there is a growing interest and investment from domestic and local funders, particularly through initiatives that encourage co-financing and capacity development. Despite this progress, domestic investment remains relatively small compared to international funding, reinforcing a cycle of dependency while indicating that local funding could play a larger role in establishing sustainable support structures.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) continues to support the evidence ecosystem through its Research and Evidence Directorate (RED). RED oversees substantial research programming and funds large Research Programme Consortia on issues ranging from vaccine development and outbreak preparedness to gender and climate change. These consortia routinely involve Southern think tanks as full partners, following the traditional “North–South” collaboration model. A review by ODI (2022) and assessments published by UKCDR and ESSENCE (2022) highlight that successful partnerships depend on equitable governance frameworks, minimum communication spend, and deeper inclusion of Southern institutions in both leadership and decision-making. FCDO has also introduced the Research Commissioning Centre (RCC) to streamline funding, improve equity in commissioning, and foster more balanced North–South collaboration (GRTD, 2024). Country and departmental offices, including Africa Division and Country Offices, continue to engage directly with local think tanks, providing discretionary support alongside centrally managed research programs.

Aside from external funding, a number of African think tanks – both governmental and independent – receive periodic and often significant support from Governments. For example, the Africa Union–World Bank–African Capacity Building Foundation partnership through the Africa Think Tank Platform (ATTP) extends multi-year grants of up to USD 10 million per consortium, reflecting growing regional and national investment in think tank capacity to steer policy debates across borders (WB & AU— ATTP, 2025). In South Africa, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) receives sustained core funding from the national government to conduct large-scale, policy-relevant social science research that directly informs national development priorities (HSRC, 2025). In Senegal, the Consortium pour la Recherche Économique et Sociale (CRES) serves as a trusted policy advisor to the public administration and regional bodies, with institutional backing from the government to support its

role in research, evaluation, and technical assistance (CRES/FAUEFAO, 2024).

The KIPPRA can count on the Government of Kenya for at least 55 percent of its annual budget, in addition to other in-kind support – including the provision of office premises and land for a new campus. This support is guaranteed by the Act of Parliament, the KIPPRA Act 2016, which codifies the Government’s long-term commitment to the Institute and provides for predictable annual funding from the national budget. Uganda’s EPRC counts the Government of Uganda as its main client as well as its largest funder. EPRC’s Strategic Plan specifically acknowledges core financial support from the Government of Uganda as critical to its sustainability and operational stability (EPRC, 2022)

Given this heterogeneity and the difficulty of quantifying how much support goes to African think tanks as we have defined them, we can safely say that there is a lot more money going into supporting evidence-informed policy making than we are able to track and trace. This makes it all the more challenging to assess the impact of investments in African think tanks.

That said, we do have significant lessons learned from at least three initiatives dedicated to supporting African think tanks over the past 25 or so years. It is worth briefly describing these initiatives before assessing what we have learned from them.

Major support initiatives

ACBF was established in 1991 by African Governments and their development partners, with the objective of helping build sustainable human and institutional capacity for good governance and development management. Its focus has been mainly on improving the relevance, responsiveness and usability of economic and social research for evidence-based decision-making and poverty reduction by enhancing the quality and relevance of policy research; enhancing policy engagement

among government and non-state actors and the use of policy products and services; and enhancing institutional and human capabilities of policy centers and think tanks to effectively support policy processes.

Since its creation in 1991, ACBF has implemented program of ‘Support to Policy Centres and Think Tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa’, providing funding and technical expertise to a large number of think tanks, and has already supported more than 60 centers in 25 African countries. Funded by the World Bank, the program was successfully closed in 2017 with the Implementation Completion Report showing that the efforts via ACBF have strengthened think tanks as influential players in Africa’s policy landscape, contributing to evidence-based decision-making and sustainable development.

ACBF partners closely with public institutions to align policies, capacity building, and leadership development with national priorities and global goals. By fostering regional collaboration, public-private partnerships, and cross-sector engagement, it builds strong capacity ecosystems that benefit institutions and communities. ACBF bridges the gap between assessment and action through targeted interventions, training, and advisory services that turn knowledge into impact. Its results-driven strategy focuses resources on high-impact areas such as climate resilience, agribusiness, trade facilitation, and economic governance, ensuring tangible, scalable outcomes where they are most needed.

The ***Secretariat for Institutional Support for Economic Research in Africa (SISERA)*** was set up in 1997 by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Recognizing that tackling the continent’s economic challenges required investing in human and institutional capacity to deliver credible, locally generated policy advice, strengthening domestic policy research institutes was prioritized. SISERA supported

a wide network of economic research centers in Sub-Saharan Africa, up to 20 centers across 18 countries, and also facilitated the formation of two sub-regional networks: SEAPREN (Southern and Eastern Africa) and WECAPREN/ROCAPE (West and Central Africa). SISERA's operations were wound down after 2006.

The ***Think Tank Initiative (TTI)***, launched in 2008 by the Hewlett Foundation and administered through the IDRC, was a ten-year program (2008–2019) that provided approximately USD 200 million in core, flexible funding and technical support to nearly 50 independent policy research institutions, selected competitively across Africa, South Asia, and Latin America. Among these, 18 think tanks in West and East Africa benefited from multi-year unrestricted funding, while seven of the 13 Eastern Africa cohort participants also received support from ACBF at program inception. TTI's central goal was to empower select, independent policy research organizations in developing countries to deliver objective, high-quality evidence that informs and influences policymaking. Its logic model rested on the idea that access to both core funding and technical assistance equips think tanks to better serve policymakers and other development actors with the evidence needed for socially and economically sound policy.

The ***Africa Think Tank Network***, hosted by ACBF aims to enhance the capacity and influence of think tanks across the continent. Since its inception in 2014, the network has regularly organized the Africa Think Tank Summit, fostering dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders. By promoting knowledge sharing and collaboration, the network empowers think tanks to address critical challenges such as governance, sustainable development, and social equity. Through strategic partnerships, it facilitates and promotes innovative policy solutions that reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of African nations.

Building on the legacy of TTI and the ACBF-supported Think Tank program, the African Union Commission (in partnership with ACBF, and AUDA-NEPAD and supported by a USD 50 million grant from the World Bank) is implementing the ***Africa Think Tank Platform (ATTP) Project*** since 2024. This five-year program invites consortia of 3–5 African think tanks to apply for up to USD 10 million in multi-year grants. The ATTP project aims to strengthen policy research capacity, foster institutional collaboration, and drive evidence-based policymaking aligned with the African Union’s Agenda 2063 across six thematic priorities: economic transformation and governance, climate change, regional trade, food security, human capital development, and digitalization. The initiative explicitly seeks to position African think tanks as integral actors in the continent’s policy architecture rather than peripheral advisers.

Think Africa Partnership (TAP), launched by the World Bank’s Africa region, TAP is a multi-donor trust fund aimed at translating research into economic policy action across Sub-Saharan Africa. TAP engages African think tanks, young professionals, and universities to foster home-grown economic policy solutions. It supports research collaboration and builds a pipeline of reform-minded talent, including over 40 Chief Economic Advisors serving heads of state.

The ***Africa Policy Bridge Tank Programme***, implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), strengthens collaboration between African think tanks and policymakers. It funds advisory networks and supports think tanks in delivering cross-border policy solutions on issues like regional trade, climate change, and economic integration.

Albeit with some significant differences in approach and emphasis, all these initiatives have essentially combined multi-year general operating budgetary support with training and technical assistance to bolster think tanks in three critical areas: organizational capacity; research quality; and policy influence. The final evaluation of the TTI project even explicitly recognizes

that “for a transformational change to occur, ten years has proven to be an appropriate timeframe.” (IDRC, 2019)

What have we learned?

Underpinning these initiatives, as well as other think tank support initiatives in the Global South (such as the Knowledge Sector Initiative in Indonesia running from 2013 to 2022) is the assumption that local knowledge, generated by local experts, is much more likely to be taken up by local policymakers, inform better policy, and ensure better development practice.

On the face of it, this assumption sounds perfectly reasonable. However, it also gives rise to a number of questions – not least whether it is indeed always the case that indigenous knowledge is by default likely to be more sought after and well received by local policymakers than external advice; whether creating a limited elite of think tanks in a given country or region is an effective way of building a local knowledge production ecosystem; and whether it is possible or indeed desirable to develop a ‘global gold standard’ model of what think tanks are or should be.

Added to this, the language used in and around think tanking assumes a teleological connection between ‘research’, ‘evidence’, ‘data’, and ‘information’ on the one hand, and its ‘influence’, ‘uptake’, and ‘use’ on the other. “If only we can conduct the right research that is robust, credible, and of consistently high quality, and render it in the right forms”, runs the narrative, “we can inform and influence policy”. Otherwise put, policy relevant research in, policy influence out.

Years of lessons learned from think tanking in Africa and elsewhere, particularly in the Global South, have taught us that it is not quite as simple as that. We know more about the demand side than we knew before. We recognize that the policy context is complicated and messy and that policy influence, and

indeed development itself, rarely ever happens in the linear ways assumed or desired.

Nonetheless, the notion that good evidence makes for better policymaking remains central to the rationale for think tanking. In the process, we still somehow believe that research evidence can be neutral and objective, and it indeed must be viewed as such if it is to be taken seriously. If there is one thing, we can say objectively about think tanking in Africa (and elsewhere in the Global South and beyond), it's that these assumptions rarely, if ever, apply.

One of the three explicit objectives of TTI was to: “facilitate and share learning about strategies for defining, building, and managing successful, sustainable think tanks with a wide range of policy research organizations and interested stakeholders”. Yet one of the major challenges faced in building the ecosystem is that investors tend not to collaborate across initiatives and are less diligent in sharing what they are learning.

Drawing on material from evaluations, reviews, and insights from observation, an important aim of this chapter is to highlight some of the main lessons learned from support to think tanks in Africa.

So, what have we learned from these three initiatives? What has worked and what has not?

The Value of ‘Core’ Support

There is near-unanimous agreement among evaluators on arguably the most important lesson emanating from the initiatives outlined above: namely that flexible support has been pivotal to providing African think tanks with the stability they need to ensure they can exit support initiatives in a much stronger position to sustain their gains than when they entered the programs.

What has worked has not simply been the provision of relatively unrestricted funds. It is the combination of flexible funding,

guaranteed over the medium-term and concentrated on building and sustaining organizational capacities that has enabled the think tanks to recruit and retain the researchers and other specialists needed to improve research quality and engage policy makers more consistently and creatively.

The relatively unfettered nature of the funding provided has also helped the think tanks develop and pursue research agendas that derive from the needs of their respective local contexts – as opposed to individual research projects that have tended to spread the scarce resources of think tanks too thin and introduce “mission creep”. As a result, today’s crop of African think tanks is better able to deliver on a core research portfolio while making smart decisions about when to take on additional work from contracts and consulting that will complement their core output.

Flexible funding has been critical in advancing the explicit goal of support initiatives in improving capacity for policy engagement, resulting in some of the impacts captured in the ‘Stories of Influence’ summarized above. In a number of think tanks, a new understanding of the value of strategic communication has led to investments in the kind of expertise that has helped position the institutes to the extent that they are now considered credible, trusted, and reliable partners by governments, funders, and civil society.

There are, of course, nuances in how effective flexible funding can be. Evidence is offered from Phase II of the TTI to back this assertion (IDRC, 2019). The greatest effects from the overall TTI intervention came from the core grant, for its instrumental value, its flexibility, and how it created an enabling space to put strategies into action. Thus, each think tank could use the funding according to its specific needs and stage in development. Some were able to extend their expertise by hiring additional staff, some consolidated their financial resilience, and others made critical investments in infrastructure.

The same study concluded that the cornerstone of organizational sustainability is the ability of think tanks to attract and retain a core team of skilled staff who can consistently produce high-quality research and uphold internal quality assurance mechanisms. When funding becomes unstable and undermines this capacity, it raises serious concerns. In addition, instead of creating dependency, core funding allowed many TTI grantees, particularly those that have undergone accelerated or transformational change, to diversify their funding and become more resilient.

There appears to be a direct correlation between the flexible and effective management systems for administering think tank support initiatives and the impact of the ‘Grants-Plus’ approach. ‘Light touch’ systems that minimize the burden of reporting requirements have both enabled grantees to have the space to develop their own strategies and plans and freed up the program officers to spend more time understanding and helping meet the needs of the think tanks (ECDPM/ODI, 2013). Support that comes with excessive bureaucracy, too many layers of approval, and onerous reporting requirements has the effect of stifling innovation and stunting progress.

Capacity development must go beyond technical training

While financial support is the most important element of these initiatives to build the think tank ecosystem, flexible support goes beyond the provision of unrestricted funding. Recipients also value the so-called ‘Grants-Plus’ approach – which involves technical advice and mentoring provided by leading experts in think tanking. In addition to managing the disbursement and effective use of the funding provided, all the initiatives highlighted have deployed dedicated expertise to help build and sustain capacity among grantees.

Increasingly, this capacity support is being tailored to the specific needs of think tanks. A key lesson learned is that “one-size-fits-all” approaches to building capacity are likely to be less successful than efforts informed by the needs of each think tank.

The hands-on role of the experts administering the think tank support programs initiative in accompanying the think tanks on their journey is, therefore, critical to the impact achieved.

ACBF also knows that organizational resilience is as important as technical research capacity. Research training alone is not enough; what truly strengthens think tanks is a holistic approach to capacity development that combines technical competencies with organizational, governance, leadership, and communication capacities (ACBF, 2024). Thus, programs that combined training with mentorship and institutional reforms had more lasting effects. The final evaluation of TTI (IDRC, 2019) also concludes that think tanks with strong leadership and deliberate investments in staff development created more resilient organizations.

Furthermore, the ability to translate research into actionable policy recommendations is as important as producing rigorous studies. Think tanks that received training in stakeholder engagement and communication were significantly more influential in shaping policy debates than those focused only on technical methods (ODI, 2022 and (UKCDR/ESSENCE, 2022).

Striking the right balance between investing in supply and stimulating demand for evidence stands out as an important overarching lesson that will shape ongoing and future efforts to build the think tank ecosystem. Previously, the assumption held sway that capacity was lacking and that it therefore needed to be developed on the supply side – by supporting the recruitment and training of researchers, investing in high-quality research, and enabling policy engagement. However, we have started to ask whether and to what extent policymakers are equipped to understand, consume, take up, and use the evidence being supplied.

While some ministries have strong policy analysis units, others lack the technical staff needed to critically engage with evidence (ACBF, 2023). This makes evidence uptake highly uneven across sectors and countries. Even when evidence is available,

policymakers operate in environments shaped by political priorities, budget cycles, and donor influence. Research that aligns with immediate political needs is more likely to be used, while long-term or complex evidence often gets sidelined (On Think Tanks, State of the Sector Report 2024). Limited data systems, fragmented policy processes, and weak institutional memory mean evidence is often not stored or transferred in usable forms. This reduces the likelihood of continuity in evidence use when administrations change (ODI, 2022).

We also recognize and have begun to develop tools to better appreciate and take into account the ‘political economy’ of policy influence. The ACBF’s Ubona Academy is explicitly designed to enhance both the hard and soft skills of public sector personnel, especially those currently holding key positions in ministries such as Finance, Planning, and Central Banks. Over the years, ACBF has trained more than 50,000 civil servants across Sub-Saharan Africa, supporting them through short courses, coaching, and leadership development to function more effectively in governance roles. Additionally, several initiatives have a capacity building component for civil servants in sectoral ministries. For instance, the African Development Institute (ADI) trains government officials on Bank-related procedures, the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) operates a Ministerial Executive Leadership Programme (MELP) tailored for current Health Ministers and their senior teams, and the African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) delivers evidence-informed policy-making workshops for mid-level policymakers in the health sector.

Networks enhance peer-learning, efficiency and uptake

Think tanks function best as learning organizations that are able to adapt, self-evaluate, and innovate in response to changing policy environments. Investments in monitoring, evaluation, and peer learning across networks often yield more sustained policy impact than stand-alone training workshops (OTT, 2024).

No single think tank can address the breadth of complex policy challenges such as climate change, trade integration, or digitalization on its own. Regional and thematic networks enable institutions to share methods, compare strategies, and collectively advocate for evidence-informed policymaking. The Africa Think Tank Summit, coordinated annually by ACBF, has become a flagship platform for fostering collaboration. It enables think tanks to exchange lessons, present policy research to governments and donors, and form cross-country consortia. Networking also strengthens think tanks' ability to advocate for recognition and domestic funding. Collective voices through platforms like the Africa Think Tank Summit have been instrumental in convincing governments and donors of the need for sustained investment in evidence ecosystems. Evaluations show that participating think tanks often return with new partnerships and improved engagement strategies that strengthen their domestic influence (ACBF, 2023).

Evidence suggests that think tanks exposed to these peer exchanges show faster progress in adopting innovations such as digital communication, M&E frameworks, and stakeholder engagement techniques (IDRC, 2019; AUC, 2025). Thus, the Africa Think Tank Platform (ATTP) project (launched in 2024 by AUC, ACBF, and AUDA-NEPAD with World Bank support), institutionalizes peer learning as part of grant-making. For example, grantees are required to collaborate in regional consortia, share research outputs, and jointly develop approaches to governance, fundraising, and policy influence.

Networks also amplify policy influence beyond the national level. On Think Tanks' State of the Sector Report 2024 notes that think tanks embedded in regional or thematic networks (e.g., climate resilience, trade policy) are better positioned to shape African Union and regional economic community agendas. Their recommendations are more legitimate when they reflect collective expertise rather than a single institution's perspective. (OTT, 2024)

Although support initiatives can play a much-needed role in convening think tanks, including around priority themes of common interest, an important lesson from these examples is that the best way for collaboration between think tanks to emerge is organically, from the bottom up, and informed by demand. While there is undisputed value in dedicating resources to stimulating collaboration between think tanks, top-down efforts to create networks are likely to be much less effective than those that evolve based on the need to solve common problems or pursue common agendas.

Context shapes effectiveness

Evaluations repeatedly emphasize that even well-resourced and technically strong organizations can only achieve influence where policymakers are receptive to evidence, civic space is protected, and policy processes are transparent (ODI, 2022). In more restrictive or fragile political settings, think tanks face limitations in access to decision-makers, potential risks to independence, and reduced opportunities to engage in open policy dialogue. By contrast, in more enabling contexts, think tanks thrive as key intermediaries between evidence and policy, leveraging their credibility and convening power to shape reforms (On Think Tanks, 2024).

Furthermore, African think tanks increasingly seek stronger domestic resource bases to reduce vulnerability, whether through predictable government budget allocations, partnerships with the private sector, or innovative revenue streams such as consultancies and endowments (ACBF, 2023). The Africa Think Tank Summit continues to emphasize the importance of diversifying funding sources and aligning with national development priorities, ensuring that think tanks maintain both credibility and relevance within their own contexts.

There is also emerging evidence that supporting think tanks consistently and over time has had an impact at the national level, particularly in countries with a critical mass of supported

institutes. Evaluations of the Think Tank Initiative (IDRC, 2019) found that in Kenya, Ghana, and Uganda, the presence of multiple supported organizations created a “critical mass” of capacity that shaped debates across sectors, from fiscal reforms to education and agricultural policy. This clustering effect meant that policymakers were not only exposed to isolated pieces of research but to a steady flow of high-quality evidence from different but complementary institutions.

ACBF also underscores that where governments regularly engage with a strong network of local think tanks, there is greater institutionalization of evidence-informed policymaking. In countries such as Rwanda and Ethiopia, investments in national policy research institutes have contributed to structural reforms in taxation, trade, and industrial policy. Where multiple think tanks are supported in one country, they often form joint platforms or coalitions that broaden their policy influence. This collective voice has been especially important in advancing agendas on climate resilience, gender equity, and regional integration, ensuring that evidence translates into more systemic reforms.

Areas for Improvement

Along the way, a number of areas for improvement have surfaced that should also inform future efforts to grow the think tank ecosystem.

Although the stated aim of the support initiatives currently being implemented is to capacitate think tanks to address development challenges they themselves identify, hence the emphasis on unrestricted funding, we have learned that the agendas of funders and policy agents are not always or even often necessarily aligned.

The broader development aid landscape is defined by uneven and inconsistent support, instrumental support predicated on thematic, geographic and ideological preferences, a lack of policy coherence among donors in the way they offer support, a reluctance to partner, and a tendency towards being risk averse.

We have observed the tendency to ‘silo-ize’ think tanks based on geographic or thematic focus, based on strongly-held views of some funders – views that are not always supported by the evidence on the ground.

We have noted that funders often find it easier to work alone than to collaborate with each other. Even where there is some intention to collaborate, building coalitions of supporters around common causes and values, and keeping such consortia together for the long-haul, can be extremely challenging. Pioneers of think tank support initiatives have often expressed frustration and wondered whether it is worth expending so much effort partnering with others.

As a consequence of these “facts of life”, there is a partial mismatch between initiatives funding think tanks in Africa and the needs on the ground. There are of course notable exceptions to this caricature, and it is widely acknowledged, for example, that private philanthropic foundations are more agile and therefore much better suited to supporting think tanks than, say, bilateral or multilateral donor agencies.

Linked to this collective action problem, funders do not always practice what they preach. The mantra of local expertise to solve local problems is not always matched by the support for developing a stronger indigenous knowledge ecosystem. In some instances, funders would rather invest their resources in global processes they hope will have an impact on the ground. All too often, the reality is that local think tanks end up as bit-part players, assembled to provide an authentic ‘voice’, stretched thin and unable to impact on the challenges that were set up to address.

The lesson here is that investment is needed at different levels – sub-nationally, nationally, sub-regionally, continentally, across South-South and globally. The trick is to be able to make the right call about where investment is needed most, and when, in order to stimulate critical mass and catalyze the momentum needed for impact to happen.

Support to think tanking in Africa has been rendered all the more challenging by the nature of the continent's borders and the sheer number of countries – 54. Limited resources have meant funders have had to make choices about where to concentrate their support. As a result, while there are a handful of strong think tanks in some of the bigger African markets (Egypt, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania), in many countries, there is not a single think tank supported by the initiatives referenced above.

Further thinking and experimentation is needed as to how best to support balanced growth of the ecosystem to critical mass, as opposed to cherry-picking and developing a small handful of super-think tanks in fragmented markets. This would also imply a much more inclusive understanding of think tanking, and indeed of the broader knowledge sector, than currently obtains.

Questions such as whether to continue to support mature think tanks at high levels, as opposed to stimulating start-ups or investing in growing young institutes, require further thought and testing. As indicated earlier, the 'supply-side' challenge of investing in tertiary education also arises.

A good way for funders to start would be to articulate a coherent, holistic vision about how they view the evidence-informed policy-making ecosystem, in particular their understanding of the supply and demand dynamics discussed above. This can then be elaborated into a coherent strategy that increases the likelihood of funders "getting bang for their buck". A clear vision and strategy are also an important prerequisite for transparency and accountability, and the entire field would benefit as a result.

Such a vision and strategy should be explicit about how the sustainability of the sector will be assured once the initiative ends. Discordant understandings of sustainability and a lack of early focus on it have weakened the impact of support initiatives to African think tanks, with a lack of an explicit exit strategy on the part of the funders creating anxiety among recipients on the one

hand, and misplaced expectations that funding will continue on the other.

Within the community, intensive reflection is underway on how to improve self-sustainability of think tanks. Overall, there is a recognition that with the external environment for funding becoming increasingly difficult, think tanks need to be smarter and more agile in how they manage existing funding and target future support.

Part of the solution is seen to lie in diversifying funding – looking for new sources of external and internal support, including corporate philanthropy, high net worth African individuals, and governments. Another thread relates to how think tanks can generate revenues from the market by “selling” specialized knowledge products to the private sector and all-comers. Some entrepreneurial think tanks are trading on real estate prices and generating revenues from rental income. Others are looking into establishing endowment funds.

‘Capacity building’ stands out as another important area for improvement. Learning by doing is inevitable, and there should always be room for iteration. However, initiatives supporting the capacity building of think tanks need to be more purposeful at their inception regarding precisely how capacity will be built, sustained, and the gains measured. Given the long-run nature of capacity strengthening, it is important that lessons learned are systematically applied and applied early.

Another area for improvement is how to stimulate think tank collaboration. Despite the exemplary instances cited earlier, partnership among think tanks has been sub-optimal, and support initiatives have not been focused enough on how to incentivize these, where doing so would result in the sum being greater than the individual parts. Think tanks themselves have not figured out how to work together. Competition, driven largely by resource scarcity by the notion that rivalry leads to the survival of the fittest, remains the order of the day.

There is insufficient understanding of how best to collaborate based on comparative and/or competitive advantage. As has been observed, funding windows dedicated to stimulating collaboration are promising but more is needed along these lines.

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is an area that requires significant improvement. We understand there is no simple solution for influencing policy, and attributing agency can be challenging. The best we can do is identify a think tank's contributions to change. However, we still lack credible and practical tools to effectively document and communicate these contributions within their policy environments. Currently, MEL practices in think tanks are often weak, frequently seen as a compliance requirement for donors rather than a strategic tool. Many think tanks also lack integrated systems that turn reflection and learning into adaptive improvements, limiting their ability to adapt to changing policy contexts.

Another dimension to this is a growing demand, particularly among funders, for convincing impact evidence – even as the recognition grows that policy impact does not happen overnight and that supporting think tanks requires patience and long-run support. The aid industry has helped build a powerful industry in impact assessment, with randomized control trials until very recently unchallenged as the ‘gold standard’. What is missing is a similar level of purposive engagement in building a body of knowledge and system of expertise around credible ways of evaluating think tank influence on policy and practice.

Recent thinking advocates for moving beyond rigid performance accountability and promotes a systems-oriented MEL, where learning, experimentation, and adaptability are prioritized (Wasafiri Hub, 2025). This is especially vital for complex policy interventions typical in think tank work.

Conclusion and recommendations

In this final section, we briefly revisit some key arguments tabled in the chapter, zoom in on some emerging challenges for African think tanks, and end with five proposals on how supporters can help sustain the think tank ecosystem over the next 10 years.

Engaging the New Millennium

Earlier in the chapter, I alluded to the rapid shifts in the global context, changes that will have ramifications for everyone. These include the apparent failure of globalization, the threat of continued financial crisis, perverse outcomes of democracy, persistent conflicts, the rise of insecurity and intensified migration, and the failure of a global rule-based system that has now given way to bilateral and plurilateral agreements, for example, on trade.

Digitalization has opened up communications and given rise to a pluralism of sources and views. This challenges knowledge sector actors to work much harder to convince their stakeholders that it is in their interest to use the evidence being generated.

There is no more important time for robust, rigorous evidence as now. Yet the field is also witnessing a palpable narrowing of civil space. In many ways, governments and authorities are clamping down on CSOs, INGOs, and philanthropy to restrict their room to be critical room to maneuver. This is partly exemplified by legislative maneuvers in countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, and even Kenya. But this is not an exclusively African phenomenon. It is happening worldwide.

Simultaneously, traditional donors are backing off from supporting civil society and independent thought. In some cases, this is because resources are becoming more and more constrained and politically contingent, as traditional bilateral donor countries administer drastic cuts to their development budgets. In other

cases, trade diplomacy and geo-politics have trumped support to (global) public goods – bilateral relationships are increasingly being instrumentalized as ‘Aid for Trade’ becomes the new mantra and aid funds are being diverted to lubricate commerce. In a few other cases, donors do not want to offend their partner governments in the Global South by supporting a sector seen as politically problematic.

All this has the potential to destabilize the think tank sector at a time which, in Africa at least, it is in a nascent, fragmented, and at the same time highly promising state.

As has been argued, and in the same way that funding is agenda-laden, think tanking is not neutral. Data, evidence, and information are not value-free – they reinforce, or challenge, existing power relations. So even as think tankers willingly pursue the modernist project of evidence-informed policy making, they need to be aware that policy is about politics and recognize that they are in a game to alter power relations— in the interests of citizens.

The obvious conclusion here is to forget about objectivity. Think tanks everywhere in the world have agendas and pursue them. The key is to be credible and robust in providing the evidence to back up one’s argumentation and to be convincing and compelling in making the case.

There is also a need to unlock domestic or indigenous philanthropic support for the knowledge sector in African countries and regions of the Global South. It is unsustainable to rely on the current wave of external funding. The resources are there – in governments, held by high-net-worth individuals, in the private sector, in other non-traditional places such as social impact investing. The question is how to access these largely untapped sources.

Part of the answer lies in being able to demonstrate value, and convincing others to provide support. Part of it lies in developing strategies, mechanisms and approaches to embedding that

support. Strategic approaches to unlocking domestic philanthropy are sorely needed – even as a good portion of effort continues to be dedicated to persuading traditional supporters to stay the course.

Think tanks need to do better working together. There exists more than enough experience from Africa as well as from the Global South and elsewhere to inform partnerships. The challenge is that think tanks are not used to collaborating. All their instincts tell them they should be competing, not sharing information, not doing things together. The scarcity of funding also fits one think tank against another.

There is also a need to improve how think tanks learn from each other as a global community. Many of the questions being pondered in one region of the world are already being addressed elsewhere, as I discovered when I attended a recent regional annual meeting of South Asian think tanks.

It is also important to reiterate that think tanks are not only those involved in socio-economic development policy at large. In Africa, as elsewhere, there are governance-focused think tanks, climate-focused think tanks, conflict, peace, and security-focused think tanks, and so on. There are even policy research organizations that refuse to adopt the label think tanks and yet have harnessed evidence to change the game in their respective policy communities. All these actors in the think tanking ecosystem have lessons that can benefit each other.

The question is how to facilitate a more intentional, action-oriented, and systematic learning across disciplines, beyond silos.

Strategies for tackling a changing environment

As has been argued, sustainability emerges as a critical challenge that African think tanks need to grapple with if the sector is to evolve from its current fragmented state into one in which there

exists a critical mass of first-class organizations intervening decisively to ensure better policies and practices for better, faster development. So, what are the strategies for survival that think tanks need to pursue in response to the challenges they face?

The phenomenon of uneven investment by funders in different kinds of think tanks based on sector orientation and other preferences is a fact of life that is unlikely to change. In response, think tanks need to diversify their funding by looking to domestic philanthropy, governments, and the private sector. To preserve independence and credibility, it is of particular importance that they avoid over-dependence on any single source of funding.

Think tanks also need to improve the management of incomes from existing support – for example, by ring-fencing a portion of their surplus incomes in ‘reserve funds’ – to insulate them against cash-flow problems that could ultimately put them out of business. There is a growing network of expertise in the philanthropic sector that can be tapped into to build such awareness and capability among African think tanks. There are also lessons from the Global South and North that can be adapted.

Added to this, new models for generating income sustainably are needed – whether from specialized products produced by dedicated consulting units, or from investments such as real estate. The conversation on these potential models needs to pick up steam and think tanks should invest in bringing some of these ideas to market.

In response to the narrowing of policy and political space in many countries, think tanks need to mobilize their collective voice to engage governments around the positive agenda they can deliver in helping address development challenges. This could involve organizing themselves into formal professional platforms – such as those common with private sector associations and alliances around Africa and the world – or better making use of digital platforms.

A lobby or forum of national think tank leaders in countries where there are enough think tanks could be an extremely powerful and persuasive platform for informing and influencing governmental policy, and reversing negative trends such as the narrowing of civic space.

A strong case could also be made for regional or continental professional bodies that bring together think tanks from different countries to engage on issues of common interest. Here, the proposal is to build on innovations such as the African Think Tank Summit, convened under the leadership of ACBF, to provide a credible forum for African think tanks to make the case for why they deserve support, pronounce on threats and challenges to their continued existence, and persuade funders to support the sustainable growth of an ecosystem determined primarily by African realities and demand.

Related to this, another important strategy for survival is for African think tanks to find ways to collaborate on specific national and regional public goods. New models for collaborative research and policy engagement are sorely needed to build a stronger and more relevant body of knowledge in and on Africa. There are evidence gaps in key areas that require collaborative efforts.

Think tanks need to be clearer in defining their role and niche. As has been highlighted, there is growing competition from consulting firms, universities, private sector think tanks, advocacy groups, INGOs, and other institutions that value evidence and are increasingly investing their own resources to generate that evidence.

Often, because they are adept at strategic engagement, have back-door access to policy makers, or can deploy high-profile shock-and-awe advocacy tactics to impact in the public sphere, these groups have the potential to outdo think tanks in their own backyard. So, think tanks that want to survive in this increasingly heterodox evidence ecosystem need to be able to demonstrate that they add value in ways that others cannot.

A final strategy for survival relates to the “tyranny of results” discussed earlier. As former ACBF Executive Secretary Frannie Léautier said in 2014, in allusion to the obsession with results: “If ACBF wanted immediate impact, it would never have invested in think tanks for more than 20 years!”. Is think tanking about delivering measurable goals over the long term or about showing impact in the short term?

The answer to that question is not an either-or – there are trade-offs to be entered into, and think tanks need to be better at communicating their impact. As we have seen, stories of influence are powerful and show what is possible with creative, committed think tanking. But more investment is needed to address the “results tyranny” while at the same time telling the think tank story over time.

Part of the answer lies in not stopping at the point of the policy. Pointing to policy documents that effectively cut, and paste think tank drafts as evidence they have informed and influenced policy and are therefore successful is necessary but not sufficient. Think tanks also need to be engaged in implementation tracking and monitoring.

Think tanks should be active in systematically assessing what is working, and what is not, and in ensuring that good policies that countries have heavily invested in informing are actually implemented and their impact verified. Again, there are success stories to highlight, one being in Tanzania, where think tanks have for many years monitored the implementation of the poverty reduction strategies for the Mainland as well as Zanzibar.

Chapter 6. A changing landscape: the effects of digitalization on African think tanks

“Technology can provide think tanks with valuable tools for more effective communication and dissemination of research useful in engaging key stakeholders.” - Barassou Diawara, 2015

Introduction

Studying how digital transformation is reshaping the operations, influence, and sustainability of African think tanks is essential for understanding their evolving role in policy and development. As the digital age reshapes how information is produced, shared, and consumed, think tanks also must adapt to remain relevant. These institutions have traditionally played a vital role in influencing public policy through rigorous research and thought leadership. Understanding how digital tools from social media to artificial intelligence are changing their operational models is essential to ensure they continue to play a pivotal role in shaping evidence-based policy across Africa.

Digital transformation also offers new opportunities for African think tanks to expand their reach and impact. Online platforms and data visualization tools enable them to engage wider audiences, including youth and policymakers who

increasingly rely on digital media for information. At the same time, this transformation raises questions about how think tanks can maintain credibility, ensure the accuracy of information, and combat the spread of misinformation in a highly dynamic digital environment. Studying these issues provides insights into how these institutions can remain influential in digital policy discussions, such as those surrounding AI ethics, digital rights, and data protection (Data Calculus).

Another critical reason to study this transformation is its potential to improve the sustainability and efficiency of African think tanks. Digital tools can streamline operations, reduce costs, and open up new funding models, such as online fundraising and digital consultancy. However, this also requires new digital competencies, cybersecurity awareness, and updated infrastructure areas, where many African think tanks still face challenges. Research can uncover these gaps and guide targeted capacity-building efforts to strengthen the institutional resilience of these organizations (Schilirò, 2024).

Moreover, Africa faces a unique digital context characterized by both innovation and inequality. Mobile technology adoption is high, yet access to reliable internet and digital literacy remains uneven. By studying how African think tanks navigate this landscape, researchers can highlight innovative, Afrocentric approaches to digital engagement and policy development (UNCTAD, 2021). This helps build a more inclusive body of global knowledge that reflects African realities and solutions. Ultimately, understanding the impact of digital transformation on African think tanks is key to ensuring these institutions remain vibrant contributors to democracy, development, and digital governance in the 21st century.

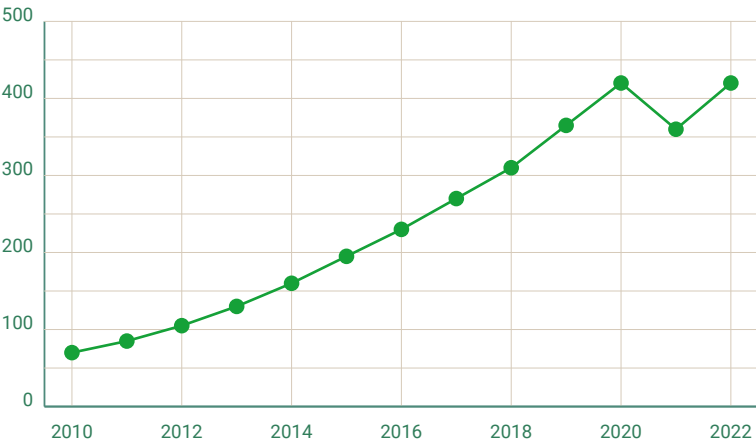
Recent trends in digitalization in Africa

Recent trends in digitalization across Africa reveal a continent rapidly embracing technology, while still grappling with

challenges of access, infrastructure, and inclusion. One of the most significant developments is the sharp rise in broadband penetration and internet usage. According to the World Bank, broadband coverage increased from 26% in 2019 to 36% in 2022, while download speeds more than tripled during that period (WB, 2023). Internet usage is rising especially fast in regions like Western and Central Africa, where access jumped from 23% in 2016 to 47% in 2021 (Goko, 2025). This growth has been driven largely by mobile connectivity, which now accounts for the vast majority of internet access across the continent.

To further illustrate the growth of internet usage in Sub-Saharan Africa, Figure 5 presents data on the increasing number of individuals accessing the internet, highlighting the significant progress made in recent years.

Figure 5. Individuals in SSA using the internet



Source: WB, 2024.

Another key trend is the expansion of digital infrastructure, including data centers and cloud services. Recognizing the need for local data sovereignty and reduced reliance on overseas servers, global firms and development organizations have made major investments in African infrastructure. For example, the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) invested \$100 million in Raxio Group to develop carrier-neutral data centers in countries like Ethiopia, Angola, and Côte d'Ivoire (Goko, 2025). Similarly, Visa recently opened its first African data center in Johannesburg, part of a broader \$1 billion investment aimed at supporting Africa's growing digital payments ecosystem (Dludla, 2025).

Fintech continues to dominate the digital transformation landscape, with mobile money and digital banking reshaping the financial services industry. A World Bank report indicates that in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), 41% of adults have an account with either a bank or mobile money service; notably, nearly 75% of account owners use mobile money. This highlights the significant role of digital financial services in the region's efforts to promote inclusion (Klapper et al, 2023). Also, according to a GSMA industry report, West Africa led global mobile money growth in 2022, accounting for 33% of all new registered mobile money accounts worldwide. The region has also become a global leader in international remittances and merchant-mobile payments (Raithatha & Storchi, 2025). Companies are capitalizing on this momentum, setting ambitious targets to increase their financial services customer base to over 120 million by 2030 (Gilbert, 2025).

North Africa: High Access, Low Affordability

North Africa boasts some of the highest fixed broadband penetration rates on the continent, particularly in countries like Egypt and Morocco. These gains are driven by government-led infrastructure investment and a relatively high concentration of urban populations. However, affordability remains a significant constraint. According to GSMA data, digital services in

North Africa are often priced above the 2% income threshold recommended by the UN, limiting access for lower-income users, especially of women and persons with disabilities (GSMA, 2023a).

Yet this progress masks structural digital inequalities. Rural areas continue to lag far behind in both access and digital literacy. Affordability remains a significant constraint, particularly for women and people with disabilities, due to high data costs relative to income (ITU, 2023). While North Africa performs relatively better on some digital gender equity indicators, entrenched patriarchal norms and language barriers still limit women's digital participation, especially in remote and conservative regions.

West and Central Africa: Mobile-Driven Growth

West and Central Africa are experiencing a surge in internet access, driven largely by mobile broadband. In Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal, mobile data usage has doubled over the past five years. The World Bank reports that internet access in the region increased from 23% in 2016 to 47% in 2021 (WB, 2024). Despite this progress, many rural areas remain underserved, and gender disparities are acute. GSMA's Mobile Gender Gap Report shows that women in the region are 30% less likely than men to use mobile internet (GSMA, 2023b).

Deep digital divides persist across gender, geography, and disability. Women in the region are 30% less likely than men to use mobile internet, largely due to gaps in digital skills, cultural restrictions, and control over devices (GSMA, 2023b). Rural residents face weak connectivity and high costs, with coverage gaps especially acute in conflict-affected areas like northern Nigeria and parts of the Sahel. People with disabilities often lack access to affordable assistive technologies and are rarely included in mainstream digital policy or services. However, despite the progress in digital infrastructure, significant challenges remain that highlight persistent inequalities in access to technology. To illustrate ongoing efforts and successes in addressing these challenges, Box 6 provides an example of Ghana's initiatives

in advancing its digital economy through key reforms and investments.

Box 6. The example of Ghana

Governments and institutions are also investing in digital public infrastructure and policy reforms to support digital economies. Countries such as Kenya and Ghana are rolling out national ID systems, digital payment frameworks, and regulatory strategies for fintech and AI. To illustrate, Ghana has made significant strides in advancing its digital economy through comprehensive reforms in biometric identification, digital payments, and legal frameworks. Central to this effort is the Ghana Card, a biometric national ID that has registered over 18.7 million citizens and now serves as a prerequisite for accessing services such as banking, passport applications, and public payments (Cilliers, 2025). Plans are underway to move 16,000 public services online via the Ghana.gov portal, all integrated with the Ghana Card, by the end of 2025 (Ecofin Agency, 2025). Additionally, the Ministry of Communications is drafting 15 new digital laws aimed at reinforcing cybersecurity, data protection, and overall digital governance (Bilali, 2025).

East Africa: Innovation Hotspots and Infrastructure Gaps

East Africa, home to digital leaders like Kenya and Rwanda, stands out for its innovation ecosystems. Services like M-Pesa and e-health platforms are recognized globally. Yet the region is also home to some of the widest rural–urban digital gaps. While Nairobi enjoys near-universal connectivity, rural northern Kenya remains digitally dark. Moreover, national disability strategies are often silent on digital accessibility, leaving millions of people with disabilities excluded from e-services (ITU, 2023).

Nevertheless, digital access and inclusion remain unevenly distributed. Large rural populations, especially in northern Kenya, eastern Uganda, and parts of Tanzania, still face poor coverage and low device affordability. In many countries, national policies do not adequately address the needs of people with disabilities. For example, digital public services often lack screen reader compatibility or sign language options (ITU, 2023). Gender gaps also persist. Women are underrepresented in the region’s fast-growing tech sector and face greater barriers to education and mobile access.

Southern Africa: Broadband Expansion and Digital Inclusion Efforts

Southern Africa, especially South Africa and Botswana, has seen relatively steady growth in both fixed and mobile broadband. Governments and NGOs in the region are also leading efforts to integrate digital accessibility into policy frameworks. For example, South Africa’s White Paper on ICT includes commitments to universal access for people with disabilities, although implementation remains uneven. Here, intersectionality is more frequently acknowledged in digital policy—but challenges remain, especially in informal settlements and rural provinces (AU, 2020).

Despite these strengths, significant inequalities remain. Urban areas enjoy vastly better service quality than rural and peri-urban regions. In countries like Zimbabwe and Zambia, economic instability has impacted both affordability and infrastructure expansion. Women in informal settlements face layered barriers—from limited access to safe internet spaces to low levels of digital literacy. Although South Africa has made policy commitments to support digital accessibility for persons with disabilities, implementation has been slow and patchy, especially outside major metropolitan areas (GSMA, 2023a).

What is more, Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and blockchain are beginning to make a mark in sectors like health, education, and agriculture. In Kenya, the PlantVillage““Nuru””

app stands out as a transformative AI-powered tool for smallholder farmers. By simply uploading photos of their crops, farmers can receive offline diagnoses for common plant diseases like cassava mosaic and maize necrosis. The app supports local languages and has led to significant improvements in productivity, increasing yields by up to 30% and boosting farmers' annual income by approximately \$300 (iAfrica.com, 2025). However, barriers such as poor rural connectivity and limited digital literacy still hinder widespread adoption. Thus, tailored and context-aware AI solutions can make meaningful contributions to Africa's digital development, despite persistent infrastructure and access challenges.

However, access to the tools offered by digitalization presents challenges. One of the foremost issues is the continent's underdeveloped digital infrastructure. While mobile internet usage is growing rapidly, Africa still accounts for less than 1% of global data center capacity, which severely limits the ability of local institutions to store and process data independently (Goko, 2025). This scarcity of data infrastructure is compounded by unreliable electricity supplies. Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa experience an average of 7.3 power outages per month, making the operation of digital systems and research facilities inconsistent and vulnerable to disruptions (Mina, 2024). Additionally, digital literacy remains low across many regions, particularly in higher education institutions where students and educators face inadequate access to training, internet connectivity, and digital learning resources (Kagoya et al., 2025).

How does digitalization transform research processes?

Access to data and digital tools brings new information to light

Access to data and digital tools is increasingly central to modern policy research, reshaping how think tanks, government agencies, and research institutions approach evidence-based decision-making. The integration of artificial intelligence, big data, and online databases provides powerful means to collect, analyze, and visualize complex datasets, enabling more accurate and timely policy recommendations. Artificial intelligence is playing an increasingly influential role in policy research and decision-making, offering tools that enhance data collection, analysis, and evaluation processes (Ramezani et al., 2023). AI also has the potential to improve precision, equity, and civic engagement of policy making, especially in sectors like healthcare and urban planning (Zhang, 2024).

For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, AI played a crucial role in monitoring infection rates, evaluating public health interventions, and forecasting future outbreaks. AI-driven dashboards combined data from hospitals, testing centers, mobility patterns, and social media to provide a comprehensive real-time picture of the pandemic's progression. Machine learning models analyzed this vast and diverse data to identify emerging hotspots, predict healthcare resource demands, and assess the effectiveness of measures such as lockdowns and vaccination campaigns. By delivering timely, evidence-based insights, AI-enabled policymakers can make informed decisions, adjusting restrictions and allocating resources efficiently to mitigate the virus's spread. (Tao et al., 2022)

AI, when used alongside big data, can uncover hidden trends, power predictive analytics, and promote more inclusive policy design through techniques like sentiment analysis (Saxena, 2024).

Sentiment analysis, a branch of natural language processing, helps artificial intelligence (AI) interpret the emotional tone in text, identifying whether content is positive, negative, or neutral. This method can also be tapped into by policymakers to gauge real-time public opinion through analyzing data from sources like social media, surveys, and public feedback. If implemented responsibly, this tool can promote more inclusive policy design by amplifying the voices of marginalized groups often absent from traditional data sources. It also allows governments to respond quickly to public dissatisfaction, identify unintended policy impacts across different communities, and tailor communication strategies to build trust and engagement (Russell et al., 2024).

Big data, particularly from mobile phone usage and satellite imagery, is revolutionizing how researchers and policymakers understand population dynamics and spatial development (DataCalculus). In Senegal, Call Detail Records (CDRs) from telecom providers have been used to track short-term internal migration, offering deeper, real-time insights into how mobility patterns shift in response to climate and economic conditions, far beyond what traditional surveys can reveal (Blanchard et al, 2025). Similarly, broader analyses have shown that CDRs provide granular, near-instant migration metrics, making them a cost-effective tool to complement national statistics (Lai et al, 2019). In Tanzania, researchers combined mobile usage and mobile money data to study post-migration vulnerabilities, discovering that people newly migrated to poorer urban areas experienced reduced financial inflows and limited social network patterns often invisible in official records (Lavelle-Hill et al, 2022).

Meanwhile, satellite technologies are transforming urban and settlement analysis. The AfriPop Project merged satellite-derived settlement maps with census and land cover data to produce detailed population distribution maps across sub-Saharan Africa, aiding targeted service delivery and infrastructure planning. (Linard et al, 2012). A recent study used deep learning on Landsat-8 imagery to generate high-resolution urban–rural classifications at a 10-meter scale, providing policymakers with critical insights for land-use planning and sustainable

development across the continent (Kakooei et al, 2024). These innovations illustrate how big data is not only supplementing traditional data sources but also enabling more responsive and inclusive policymaking.

Online databases and open data portals, such as government statistical bureaus, international development datasets, and academic research repositories, have democratized access to high-quality information. These platforms allow researchers, even in resource-constrained environments, to access timely data for policy evaluation, socio-economic analysis, and sectoral planning. In Africa, platforms like Africa Open Data Network, Afrobarometer⁴, and the World Bank's Databank⁵, are increasingly used by think tanks and academic institutions to support research and advocacy. For African think tanks, these methods provide ways to overcome weaknesses in national statistical systems.

Digitalization is also changing research methodologies. In the past, policy research heavily relied on face-to-face surveys, census data, and administrative records. Computational social science, for instance, increasingly draws on large-scale digital traces of human behavior (social media posts, mobile phone data, online transactions) rather than, or alongside, traditional surveys. Instead of asking people about their behaviors, researchers infer them directly from digital footprints, then triangulate with classical methods (<https://thedecisionlab.com/reference-guide/computer-science/computational-social-science>). Think tanks can now co-produce knowledge with citizens through digital platforms, as well. This includes crowdsourced mapping, participatory budget monitoring apps, or digital citizen reporting systems (Elias P, et al., 2023). It shifts methodologies towards participatory action research in the digital space.

4 Afrobarometer: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/data/>

5 World Bank Open Data Portal: <https://data.worldbank.org/>

‘Netnography’ or digital ethnography adapts ethnographic methods to digital settings, providing insights into discourse, identity formation, or citizen mobilization in ways that would be hard to capture offline (Viljoen & Fourie, 2022). For example, online feminist movements in East Africa (e.g., #MyDressMyChoice in Kenya) have been studied using netnography to understand how digital spaces amplify grassroots activism, shape gender policy debates, and pressure governments.

Digitalization also makes it possible to build complex simulations of policy systems (e.g., labor markets, climate adaptation, or migration flows) using computational agents that interact according to behavioral rules (Belfrage et al., 2024). This methodology is increasingly applied by think tanks to test “what if” policy scenarios in a virtual environment before policies are rolled out.

Remote collaboration and digital platforms change the way research teams and networks operate

The rise of remote collaboration tools and digital platforms, such as Zoom, Miro, Notion, Slack, and Google Workspace, has fundamentally reshaped how research teams operate, especially in the Global South, where geographic and infrastructural barriers often hinder coordination. These tools have enabled real-time communication, asynchronous collaboration, and cloud-based knowledge sharing, fostering more agile, inclusive, and cross-border research environments.

Digital platforms have increasingly supported virtual meetings, interviews, and policy dialogues, reducing reliance on physical travel and enabling broader engagement, including participation from individuals in remote or underrepresented regions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread shift to online interactions led to what has been termed the “Zoomification” of academic and policy research, a significant change in how collaboration, mentoring, and communication occur in

professional settings (Bozeman and Gaughan, 2023). Interactive tools such as digital whiteboards have also been integrated into research workflows, used to support collaborative brainstorming, theoretical mapping, and participatory design, offering persistent visual workspaces accessible throughout various project stages (Spruce et al., 2024).

Similarly, knowledge management tools that facilitate collaborative documentation, project tracking, and database development are particularly effective in addressing knowledge fragmentation and supporting coordinated efforts within remote or distributed research teams (Harvard Business Review, 2021). For African think tanks and academic institutions, these platforms facilitate pan-African collaboration, connect diaspora experts with local institutions, and support multi-language documentation and research coordination.

While remote collaboration has opened unprecedented possibilities for transnational teamwork and inclusion, its limitations are increasingly visible, particularly in under-connected regions. In many African contexts, unstable internet, frequent power outages, and costly data create persistent barriers to sustained virtual engagement. Even where connectivity exists, the intensification of screen-based work has led to digital fatigue, with individuals reporting emotional exhaustion, blurred work-life boundaries, and declining attention spans (MDPI, 2023). Moreover, language barriers, especially when English dominates the platform, can alienate local actors and diminish the richness of exchange.

The accessibility of remote tools also remains uneven: many popular collaboration platforms are not fully compatible with screen readers, voice commands, or low-bandwidth settings, thus excluding people with disabilities or those using older devices (Mardillu, 2023). These compounding stressors suggest that remote work must be supported by inclusive design, hybrid approaches, and policies prioritizing well-being and equitable participation, not just convenience and efficiency.

Opportunities in communication, outreach, and policy influence

The rise of digital platforms, social media, and podcasts has revolutionized how think tanks and policy researchers in Africa (and elsewhere) communicate their work and influence public discourse. These tools provide accessible, real-time channels for disseminating research findings, engaging stakeholders, and amplifying policy recommendations beyond traditional academic or government circles. Open-access webinars and virtual roundtables, often hosted via online platforms, allow researchers to engage not just policymakers but also civil society, youth, media, and international partners, thus broadening the scope and reach of their influence.

Many African think tanks now use social media not only to share reports but also to participate in live policy conversations, tag decision-makers, and respond to unfolding events. 75% of them create social media content to bring research insights to the public eye, according to a recent survey (Ndiaye, 2024). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations like the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) adopted virtual dissemination strategies to ensure continuous stakeholder engagement and policy dialogue across borders (AERC, 2020). Studies have shown that social media engagement significantly improves research visibility and enables feedback loops with the public, journalists, and policymakers (OTT, 2022).

Additionally, podcasts and blogs offer more informal, narrative-driven formats for breaking down complex research into accessible stories, fostering broader public understanding and participation. These tools also allow for cost-effective advocacy, making it possible for resource-constrained institutions to build influence across borders and sectors. Ultimately, digital engagement ensures that diverse voices can contribute to shaping policy agendas. The transformative potential of digital engagement is evident in how think tanks can catalyze public debate and influence policy through innovative approaches. Box

7 highlights notable examples of how think tanks in Africa have effectively utilized communication strategies to shape policy outcomes and foster democratic participation.

Box 7. Example of how public debate initiated by a think tank can shape policy

In advance of the 2000 presidential elections, the Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), Ghana (IEA) organized Ghana's first-ever televised presidential debate, marking a milestone in democratic engagement and public discourse. The event reshaped Ghana's political communication landscape. It led to the regular inclusion of presidential debates in subsequent election cycles and contributed to the formation of a Political Parties Code of Conduct in 2004. This culminated in the establishment of a National Enforcement Body, recognized formally in Ghana's State of the Nation Address for promoting multi-party cooperation and good governance (Mensa, 2015)

The Kenya Information, Communication and Technology Action Network (KICTANet) facilitated inclusive public engagement on key ICT regulation issues, such as the drafting of Kenya's ICT Policy and Data Protection Act, and consultations on the African Union Convention on Cybersecurity. These multi-stakeholder consultations significantly influenced Kenya's policy trajectory (KICTANet, 2021).

Similarly, data visualization and infographics have emerged as powerful tools for simplifying complex research findings, allowing non-specialist audiences, including journalists and community leaders, to grasp key policy implications quickly. This approach has enhanced evidence uptake and improved the responsiveness of policy systems. Online dashboards and data-driven infographics not only increase visibility but also foster trust

and legitimacy, as more actors are involved in the knowledge-to-policy pipeline (OTT, 2022).

In essence, the shift to open engagement is helping policy institutions move from being knowledge producers to knowledge brokers, actively shaping and participating in public policy debates. By acting as conveners, they bring together government officials, academics, civil society, and media in forums that spark debate and foster coalition-building, influencing both decision-makers and public opinion alike (Subotić, 2018). In democracies, this public engagement empowers citizens to pressure leaders for change, reinforcing the think tanks' role as intermediaries between research and civic action (Ofosu, 2017).

Organizational change and capacity challenges

Digitalization, however, is not only creating opportunities but also has its challenges. African think tanks face an urgent and multifaceted digital skills gap that directly undermines their ability to produce high-quality research, safeguard their operations, and effectively shape public discourse. Indeed, in 2022, African countries scored between 1.8 and 5 on the Digital Skills Gap Index, below the global average of 6. Of the world's 20 countries with the weakest digital skills, 12 are in Africa, and only 11% of Africa's tertiary education graduates have formal digital training. Nearly all African countries fall below the G20 mean for digital literacy and capacity, and digital skills remain the one dimension in which no African country in a recent study reached G20 benchmarks (Bhorat et al, 2023). As a result, about 87% of African business leaders identify digital skills development as a priority area in need of further investment (WB, 2023).

Without strong data literacy, analysts risk misinterpreting datasets, leading to weaker evidence-based recommendations. Misinterpretation of data can result from misunderstandings of statistical concepts, incorrect data cleaning or processing, or

failure to recognize biases and limitations within the data. This can produce flawed insights, misleading trends, or inaccurate conclusions that ultimately weaken the quality and reliability of policy recommendations. For example, analysts might overlook confounding variables, misread correlations as causations, or fail to account for data gaps, leading to decisions that do not effectively address the real issues or may even cause unintended harm.

Furthermore, poor data literacy impedes the ability to communicate findings clearly and convincingly to policymakers and stakeholders, reducing trust and uptake of evidence in the decision-making process. In the context of public policy, where decisions affect large populations and resource allocations, these risks underscore the urgent need for enhanced data literacy among researchers and analysts to ensure sound, impactful policy interventions (Kitchin, 2014).

Similarly, limited web analytics capacity hinders think tanks' ability to track audience engagement, measure the reach of their work, and refine dissemination strategies. While there is widespread acknowledgment of the importance of web analytics, many think tanks currently lack the tools or systems needed to gather and analyze digital engagement effectively, underscoring a clear and urgent capacity gap (OTT, 2024).

In addition, African think tanks, often central to policy research and public discourse, face significant challenges in digital storytelling, crucial in leveraging digital media as a tool to communicate research and engage broader audiences. Despite growing interest in digital transformation across the continent, many organizations lack the multimedia and narrative-building skills needed to craft compelling, inclusive stories rooted in local contexts (Ambala, 2020).

At the same time, cybersecurity weaknesses present an operational risk, with nearly a quarter of cybersecurity roles unfilled across the continent, leaving think tanks exposed to threats that can

compromise sensitive policy data. The cybersecurity talent gap is estimated at around 23% of roles unfilled, which equates to roughly 68,000 vacancies across the continent (Maher et al, 2025). This shortfall is especially troubling as cyber threats are on the rise, with attacks targeting government bodies, airlines, and e-government platforms in several African countries.

African think tanks face key internal challenges that limit their ability to adapt, including tight budgets, resistance to change, and a shortage of dedicated IT or communications staff. Limited funding makes it difficult for these organizations to invest in the infrastructure and skills needed to modernize and innovate. Resistance to change can slow the adoption of new technologies and approaches, while the lack of specialized personnel hinders the effective sharing of research and engagement with stakeholders. These challenges reduce operational efficiency and limit the influence of think tanks on policy and development. Overcoming these barriers is essential to strengthening their impact and supporting sustainable development across Africa (ACED, 2024). The challenges of digital skills gaps are not uniform across Africa and can vary significantly from one country to another. Box 8 provides a closer look at the situation in South Africa, highlighting both the progress made and the ongoing disparities in digital skills that need to be addressed.

Box 8. Digital skills in South Africa

The Africa Growth Initiative at Brookings elaborated a detailed study about digital skills gaps in Africa (Bhorat et al, 2023). South Africa stood out for having a relatively higher base of digital skills compared to many African peers. However, there remains a significant mismatch between the increasing digital demands of employers, and the available talent pool, especially in lower-income and rural areas. This mismatch becomes more visible in sectors undergoing faster digital transformation (e.g. finance, public administration, education).

Moreover, the report notes a spatial dimension to inequality: Urban centres like Cape Town and Johannesburg show higher digital skills penetration, whereas townships and rural provinces lag behind. This gap is also linked to persistent disparities in access to education, internet connectivity, and training opportunities.

Organizations such as ACBF support digitalization by providing training, open-source tools, and technical assistance, while think tank networks and regional coalitions foster knowledge sharing, collaborative initiatives, and advocacy for digital infrastructure. Together, these measures help think tanks enhance organizational resilience, improve research efficiency, and strengthen policy impact in an increasingly digital environment.

ACBF is strategically positioned to accelerate digitalization across Africa by fostering the adoption of open-source technologies and delivering targeted training programs. As a recognized AU specialized agency for capacity development, ACBF has a strong track record in building both human and institutional capacities, including supporting over 70 universities to enhance online research capabilities and training more than 50,000 civil servants

across the continent. Through its Ubora Academy, which is a key initiative under its 2023–2027 strategy, the Foundation offers short courses, coaching, and mentoring that build both hard and soft digital skills among public sector officials, think tanks, and civil society actors (AU, 2023).

Additionally, ACBF was instrumental in the development of the African Union’s Digital Transformation Strategy (2020–2030), acting as lead drafter of one of its sections. ACBF also produced *The Africa Capacity Report 2019: Fostering Transformative Leadership for Africa’s Development*, which assessed 17 think tanks, specifically addressing the “institutional and regulatory framework for science, technology, and innovation” (ACBF, 2019). It also highlights human and institutional capacity challenges and deficits in STI and calls for urgent attention to develop institutional and human capacity in all areas of STI development and maintenance.

ACBF has established a collaborative network of over 60 think tanks that drive evidence-based policymaking and analysis critical in strengthening economic governance and setting benchmarks that support sustainable development.⁶ Additionally, its convening power, shown through events such as the Africa Think Tank Summit, promotes the exchange of best practices and strategies for digital transformation among peers.

Moreover, the African Union Commission, together with ACBF and AUDA-NEPAD launched the Africa Think Tank Platform (ATTP) Project in order to further strengthen the sector by offering competitive grants up to USD10 million per consortium to selected cross-border consortia of think tanks working on critical themes such as digitalization, governance, and economic transformation. Such platforms enable think tanks to pool

6 <https://www.theacbf.org/about-us/>

resources, access cutting-edge open-source digital tools, and co-design digital solutions tailored to regional contexts.

In 2023, 16 member states ratified the African Union's 2014 Malabo Convention. The treaty provides a comprehensive legal framework spanning cybersecurity, data protection, e-transactions, and cross-border data cooperation. It requires states to adopt national legislation, establish independent data protection authorities, and ensure transparency and consent in data processing. The African Union has a Data Policy Framework that presents continent-wide data guidelines and policy recommendations for states (AUC, 2022). However, the implementation of these frameworks is lagging behind, due to limited resources, infrastructure, or political will to handle regulatory inconsistencies, low levels of public understanding of data rights, and socio-cultural factors that hinder the widespread uptake of data protection practices (Kictanet, 2025).

Recommendations for think tanks to leverage digitalization effectively

Invest in Core Digital Skills and Capacity Building

For think tanks to truly benefit from digitalization, the most foundational investment must be in their people. Building digital capacity means equipping staff at all levels, not just IT personnel, with skills in data analysis, digital research methods, cybersecurity hygiene, digital communication tools, and content creation. This includes training in AI tools, survey platforms, online facilitation, and emerging digital research techniques. Formal training is not the only way; peer learning, on-the-job coaching, and communities of practice can also foster digital confidence.

Ensure Infrastructure and Operational Readiness

No amount of digital ambition can succeed if the basic infrastructure is unreliable. Many African think tanks face persistent operational barriers such as unstable internet connections, frequent power cuts, and outdated hardware. These problems undermine research timelines, reduce staff productivity, and make remote collaboration stressful. Stable connectivity, cloud storage, power backups, and low-bandwidth-friendly tools require a certain budget allocation. Institutions working in fragile or rural contexts should explore partnerships with infrastructure providers or mobile network operators to improve connectivity. Investing in shared infrastructure (such as co-working labs) can also reduce costs while boosting collective access to digital tools.

Adopt Digital Strategy and Flexible Workflow Design

Think tanks should develop an explicit digital strategy that aligns with their research priorities, policy engagement goals, and organizational identity. This strategy should address not only technical tools but also governance (e.g., data protection protocols), staffing models, and platform choices. Asynchronous work formats combining offline preparation and online engagement can help reduce burnout and adapt to diverse connectivity contexts. Thinking flexibly also means using open-source tools where possible, allowing staff to work securely from multiple devices, and enabling different levels of access for staff or partners with limited digital fluency.

Leverage Digital Tools for Communication, Visibility, and Policy Influence

Digitalization offers think tanks new ways to broaden their influence if used wisely. Beyond publishing PDFs, organizations should explore infographics, policy videos, webinars, data visualizations, blogs, and interactive dashboards to communicate findings more effectively. Social media can enhance visibility and engage new audiences, especially youth and non-specialists. Importantly, communication should not be an afterthought:

content strategies, engagement metrics, and storytelling skills should be built into research workflows. Successful think tanks increasingly invest in digital communications teams, recognizing that in today's crowded media space, how research is shared is nearly as important as what it says.

Forge Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations

Think tanks often operate with lean teams and constrained budgets, yet digital tools can be expensive, complex, or require deep expertise. Partnerships are key in solving this conundrum. Collaborating with universities, tech hubs, digital rights organizations, or private sector actors can give think tanks access to technical support, tools, or funding they would otherwise lack. Regional collaboration can also help in shared online repositories, training programs, or pooled licensing agreements, which can build collective capacity.

Ensure Sustainability and Continuous Learning

Digitalization is not a one-time investment but a continuous process of adaptation. Think tanks must avoid one-off “pilotitis” (the tendency to launch pilot projects instead of an all-encompassing strategy) and instead integrate maintenance, updating, and reflection into their digital work. This means budgeting for software updates, staff training refreshers, and IT audits over time. Feedback loops should be built into digital platforms, so users can report issues, suggest improvements, and ensure tools remain relevant. As the digital landscape evolves rapidly, think tanks must commit to learning: scanning the horizon, testing new formats, and sharing their own digital learning journeys with peers and partners.

Conclusion

African think tanks have an unprecedented opportunity to amplify their policy influence by leveraging digital transformation to address structural and operational gaps. Democratizing knowledge through open-access research portals, multilingual publications, and the use of social media enables a broader range of stakeholders, from grassroots organizations to policymakers, to engage with evidence-based insights without the traditional barriers of cost or limited distribution. This not only fosters inclusivity but also ensures that marginalized voices and local contexts are integrated into policy debates. At the same time, digital platforms and collaborative networks help reduce geographic silos by connecting researchers and institutions across regions, enabling cross-border peer learning and coordinated policy responses to shared challenges such as climate change, food security, or health crises (Ijjasz-Vasquez et al., 2022). Moreover, the adoption of digital tools and platforms empowers think tanks to deliver real-time responsiveness, providing rapid analysis and policy input in response to emerging challenges, a capability that is increasingly essential in a fast-paced digital era (Sabinet, 2025).

Still, African think tanks face significant digital risks and limitations that can hinder their effectiveness and influence. This is due to several factors. One of the major challenges is limited funding, which undermines both their infrastructure development and ability to attract and retain skilled staff. As highlighted earlier, most such institutions depend heavily on project-based, short-term donor funding, which hinders consistent institutional growth and stability. Nearly 64% rely on project rather than core funding, and 61% struggle to cover indirect costs such as infrastructure or benefits that are essential for organizational resilience. This unstable funding environment, combined with the competition for talent from better-resourced organizations, contributes to high staff turnover and impedes long-term strategic planning (Ndiaye, 2024).

Another challenge is the lack of ethical standards in the digital world that compromises both individual rights and institutional credibility. Misinformation is also a challenge for African Think Thank. In fact, African think tanks must contend with the pervasive challenge of misinformation, which erodes public trust in their research outputs and complicates efforts to promote evidence-based policymaking.

This issue is exacerbated by cybersecurity vulnerabilities. Africa's rapid digitalization is not matched by adequate defensive measures (TBI, 2022). As a result, institutions (including think tanks) are exposed to threats such as data breaches, espionage, and sabotage of critical digital infrastructure (ACSS, n.d.). The increasing reliance on third-party digital platforms also heightens platform dependence, which diminishes autonomy over technology choices and data governance, exposing institutions to external control and digital colonialism (Salami, 2024). These tools often fail to reflect local contexts, producing skewed results that may reinforce existing inequalities rather than address them. Without local control over data, African countries risk becoming passive consumers of externally shaped digital systems, undermining both data sovereignty and public trust (Kouladoum et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires coordinated investments in infrastructure, localized AI development, stronger data governance frameworks, and inclusive digital literacy programs tailored to African policy environments (Thembekele, 2024).

African think tanks must prioritize strong ethical standards in the digital environment to protect both individuals and institutions. Data privacy demands clear regulatory frameworks and accountable practices, particularly given the uneven enforcement across the continent and the critical importance of safeguarding personal and institutional data (Bouke et al, 2024). When it comes to responsible AI, African policymakers are now guided by the African Union's Continental AI Strategy, which emphasizes a people-centered, equitable, and ethics-driven approach to AI deployment across the continent (AUC, 2024). Ensuring the rights of researchers and citizens in the digital space is equally

vital; initiatives like the AI Ethics, Data and Digital Rights Accelerator empower journalists and civil society across Sub-Saharan Africa to advocate for human-rights-aligned digital policies and to strengthen frameworks that uphold transparency, fairness, and inclusivity in tech deployment (TRF, 2025a).

In order to promote strong ethical standards in the digital era, African think tanks can play a pivotal role by leading and producing rigorous research on digital ethics, privacy, surveillance, and data protection, helping governments and institutions adopt human-rights-based digital policies. They can also educate citizens on their digital rights and pressure governments to enact or enforce ethical digital laws through research infographics, podcasts and public forums, or training for public servants, civil society actors, and media professionals on topics like ethical data use, digital rights, algorithmic fairness, and responsible AI.

Internally, to maximize their impact and ensure long-term sustainability, African think tanks should prioritize the development of a comprehensive digital strategy that encompasses the adoption of advanced digital tools for research, data collection, and dissemination of findings. This strategy should include establishing a robust online presence through user-friendly websites, active social media engagement, and the use of multimedia content such as infographics, videos, and interactive dashboards to reach a broader audience. Investing in upskilling staff is crucial; this involves providing training in digital literacy, data analysis, coding, and digital communication to build internal capacities that can adapt to emerging technological trends. Furthermore, fostering strategic partnerships with technology actors such as local and international tech firms, startups, universities, and digital innovation hubs can facilitate access to innovative solutions, funding opportunities, and technical expertise. These collaborations can also help think tanks integrate artificial intelligence, machine learning, and big data analytics into their research processes, thereby increasing the quality, depth, and relevance of their policy recommendations. By focusing on these interconnected areas, African think tanks can

enhance their influence, improve policy advocacy, and contribute more effectively to sustainable development across the continent.

Moreover, African think tanks can shape the global digital agenda by offering context-rich, equity-driven, and locally grounded insights into digitalization itself. Far from being passive adopters of global trends, many African policy institutions are actively engaging in research and advocacy to ensure that digitalization serves the needs of diverse and historically marginalized communities.

Initiatives such as the Africa Digital Rights Hub and the work of institutions like Research ICT Africa and CIPESA (Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa) exemplify how African think tanks are incubating models of digital accountability and inclusion that go beyond technocratic solutions. They foreground human rights, local languages, informal economies, and alternative knowledge systems, areas often overlooked in dominant global digital narratives. Their interventions in AI ethics, digital ID governance, and access to data for development point to frameworks that are not only innovative but globally relevant in their commitment to equity and justice.

However, realizing this potential requires that the global community sees African think tanks not merely as beneficiaries of digital capacity building, but as co-creators of digital futures. For Africa, digitalization is often framed through the lens of “catching up” with the rest of the world, yet this view overlooks a more profound and strategic potential. Institutions such as On Think Tanks and the African Capacity Building Foundation have called for stronger investment in digital infrastructure, open data systems, and transcontinental policy dialogue to allow African policy voices to shape international agendas meaningfully (On Think Tanks, 2023; ACBF, 2021). Their inclusion in global fora is essential to ensuring that digitalization is not extractive but co-owned and co-designed.

Chapter 7. The road ahead

Africa's average sustained economic growth, the rise of its middle class, and a growing conviction that the continent has turned a corner have created demand for high-quality think-tanks grounded in African reality but with access to the global body of knowledge (Neil, 2014). Moreover, the potential important role to be played by the institutions for the successful implementation of Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 calls for a closer look at the creation, management and sustainability of think tanks in Africa.

The previous chapters provide a rich and wide range of information on the experience of African think tanks as well as the capacity imperatives for the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks on the continent. This book aims to start stripping away some of the mystery surrounding the think tank industry in Africa by explaining the significant historical developments and illuminating the major trends and factors shaping the creation, management and sustainability of the institutions. The book does so by dedicating specific chapters for think tanks to directly share their experiences and lessons learnt as well the capacity building institutions like ACBF – which has been a key and main supporter of think tanks in Africa – to highlight the processes used to develop and support think tanks across the continent. Moreover, the book also collects views and experiences from independent observers of Africa's development agenda in general and think tanks evolution, in particular.

Although there is no size-fits-all when it comes to how to create, manage, and sustain a think tank in Africa, the various chapters provide as much evidence and practical cases as possible to support decision-making and learning in obviously all African contexts. What is recognized throughout all chapters is that state and non-state actors, including politics and its processes, are increasingly becoming more dependent on expertise provided by

the think tanks. The cross-cutting key messages, lessons learnt, and recommendations stemming from the various chapters are summarized in this concluding chapter.

Key messages and lessons learnt

Think tanks in Africa are considered to be able to take advantage of their unique positions and unrivaled freedoms and independence by pushing for and supporting innovation and experimentation, by listening and learning, and partnering with other actors to work collaboratively in pursuit of Africa's transformation. The main messages and lessons learnt from this volume – which are all equally important for the creation, management, and sustainability of think tanks in Africa – are as follows.

Creation of effective think tanks

There is near-unanimous agreement that flexible support has been pivotal to providing African think tanks with the stability they need to ensure they can exit support initiatives in a much stronger position to sustain their gains than when they entered the programs. Long-term flexible core funding has been highly effective and has delivered value for money for all think tanks in Africa. Long-term flexible support pays off and leverages broader impact as well as resources and their sources. The experience and support provided by ACBF have fulfilled an important role in nurturing young think tanks through close supervision and hands-on support.

The fact that ACBF has been supporting young and promising think tanks has often encouraged other partners and donors to join in with their support. ACBF's start-up support gives confidence to other donors and partners to provide support it has been building basic capacity to receive and handle funding partnerships. With core funding, think tanks have usually been

able to follow-through their own priorities and agenda. This was generally seen as an empowering experience, adding to the confidence of think tanks.

Priorities and agendas of think tanks should be in line with Africa's context and culture while aiming at contributing to addressing the local challenges. Think-tanks that are based in Africa and mainly run by Africans should have both a greater sense of the economic reality on the ground and also stand a bigger chance of securing the ear of governments (Ford, 2014). Local and national problems are best solved through indigenous solutions: such solutions can only be well crafted if they depend on rigorous research, analysis, advice, and advocacy, which think tanks can provide. The agenda of African think tanks needs, therefore, to ensure that Africa's priorities are the center of their preoccupations. The importance of addressing local challenges has been also a requirement for capacity building institutions such as ACBF in developing and providing funds to its supported-think tanks.

Think tanks can and should play a key role by serving as catalysts for ideas and proposing practical solutions for policy problems in the African context. Moreover, they can also act as bridges between governments, business, and civil society. KIPPRA in Kenya, which aims to provide advisory and technical services on public policy issues to the government, government agencies, and other stakeholders, is a good example. For instance, KIPPRA has played an instrumental role in the preparation of medium- and long-term policy perspectives of the government of Kenya, especially the Economic Recovery Strategy and the Kenya Vision 2030, while continuously producing the Kenya Economic Report. In 2002/2003, the Institute spearheaded the development of the Economic Recovery Strategy for Wealth and Employment Creation, in collaboration with various stakeholders, especially the Ministry of Planning. After the Economic Recovery Strategy implementation period, KIPPRA was again called upon to conceptualize another longer-term economic growth framework to propel the country to a newly industrialized country by 2030.

Management of effective think tanks

Appropriate institutional arrangements, including the leadership, are the basis for creating, operating, and sustaining well-performing think tanks. Good institutional setting and governance board are critical in ensuring the well-functioning, relevance, and impact of the think tanks. Policies are very useful governance instruments that provide all organizational participants, whether internal or external, with the guidelines necessary for patterning intra- and extra-organizational behavioral activities. For instance, the experience and practice at ESRF in Tanzania show that the institutional structure, especially ESRF Management and the Board of Trustees, which is democratic and efficient, has supported the visibility and the delivery of some core functions, such as resource mobilization.

Institutional arrangements are expected to identify clear roles and responsibilities for the involvement of stakeholders at all policy levels. This includes streamlining resource use for accountability and efficiency, establishing local champions to lead the work and ensure buy-in and ownership, and engaging with experts, whether local or from other African countries with similar experiences, to offer opportunities for learning and supporting capacity building.

Another experience and example was provided by the case of EDRI in Ethiopia. The location of EDRI in the office of the Prime Minister, its six-monthly reporting to the relevant committees of the Parliament, and the active participation of Ministers in the technical advisory committee were a unique arrangement with a high positive dividend, as EDRI has been able to engage directly with policy makers at the highest level. EDRI research findings have had a significant influence on policy-making processes in the country. Thus, the institutional arrangement is a critical success factor.

African think tanks are critical and could play a significant role in identifying capacity gaps as well as building the capacities of key actors and institutions in the economy. Think tanks, by virtue

of their mandate and role, produce research-based evidence to address policy issues, and inform and influence the policy-making processes through various engagement strategies (advice and advocacy). They are seen as influential players in shaping development policy and practice.

For instance, now that the African countries are implementing the global Agenda 2030 and Africa's Agenda 2063, which are aspirational goals stretching into the long term, leaving countries with space to seek their own paths, African think tanks should be key actors. Within this framework, African think tanks can play a critical role as organizations designed for and capable of long-term thinking and reflection. It is therefore important that the transformation of Africa be central to think tanks' agendas, helping the governments of the continent better position Africa in relation to the world, by offering bold ideas, optimism about the future, and changing the prevailing pessimistic impressions about the continent.

Given their importance in policy research, advice, and advocacy—especially regarding Africa's long-term development agenda—governments and development partners need to strengthen the capacities of local think tanks. This support will enable these think tanks to help build the capacities of other key players in the economy.

Sustainability of think tanks

Within the community, intensive reflection is underway on how to improve the self-sustainability of think tanks. Overall, there is a recognition that with the external environment for funding becoming more and more difficult, think tanks need to be more innovative, and more agile in how they manage existing funding and target future support. An important aspect to be considered for think tanks is to have a constructive and fruitful partnership with the government, namely, ensuring government funding. The experience of KIPPRA is worth mentioning. KIPPRA can

count on the Government of Kenya for at least 55 percent of its annual budget, in addition to other in-kind support – including providing office premises and land for a new campus. Moreover, the case of EEA in Ethiopia is also a good example of ensuring sustainability in the sense the think tank has constructed a multi-purpose building complex. As a means to generate income, parts of the office spaces are rented out and contribute to the financial sustainability efforts of the think tank.

ESRF in Tanzania has also been able to secure funds from the government while being innovative in generating additional funding. The Government of Tanzania provided ESRF with its first premises, a residential house which was rehabilitated and brought to an operating standard with offices and a meeting room. Later, ESRF built, using internally generated resources, a conference room to secure additional financial resources. Moreover, to better manage existing funding and target future support, the think tank has put in place strategies for sustainability by building a three-floor extension block with a library, a computer room, and committee rooms.

The long-term financial sustainability of African think tanks – which is the main challenge and fear of all think tanks – can be guaranteed by several factors: the relevance of the institutions’ objectives, the quality of their interventions, diversification of funding sources, and an increase in the proportion of internally generated income.

Recommendations and policy actions

In this book, we explored the creation, management, and sustainability of African think tanks by analyzing and sharing the experiences of both think tanks and the institutions that develop and support them on the continent. From this analysis, we can identify the types of interventions needed at both the continental

level and through coordinated national policies to effectively support think tanks in their contributions to Africa's development agenda.

Creation of effective think tanks

Importance of relevant and fit-for-purpose structure and governance. In creating think tanks, there is need to have a well-designed structure, informed by capacity needs with clear beneficiaries and based on the political, social-economic circumstances of the country where the institution is being created. Furthermore, the availability of quality staff and their retention strategies need to be tackled at the creation stage. Moreover, the governance structure, policies, and procedures must also be effective for the smooth running of the think tank and its programs. It is also important to ensure that future priorities are also integrated in setting up the institutional mechanisms for governance and management before the implementation of the activities.

Support for think tanks should be institutionalized through political and financial backing, as well as by creating a conducive environment. As demonstrated by various successful think tanks across the continent, it is advisable to establish a dedicated budget line for think tanks. All countries, regional economic communities, and continental bodies such as the African Union Commission and the African Development Bank should contribute resources and appropriate support. Domestically pooled resources should be allocated to national think tanks with effective accountability, monitoring, and reporting systems. Meanwhile, regionally and globally mobilized resources can be managed by continental institutions like the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), which has the necessary experience and understanding of the think tank sector. At the country level, the idea is to institutionalize the ad hoc arrangements in place in a number of African countries, whereby governments provide think tanks with a periodic subvention to enable them to deliver policy-

relevant research, advice, and advocacy. What is required is to develop guidelines proposing that governments should set aside an amount in the annual budget to support national think tanks. Moreover, the guideline would also incorporate some guidance on the requirements and expectations, as well as the monitoring and reporting on the use of the resources.

Management of think tanks

Good corporate governance helps to ensure effective management of think tanks and high project/program implementation – with clear duties of the Executive Director and the Board of Directors. Moreover, there is therefore need to strengthen the institutional, governance, transformative leadership, soft and technical capacities of think tanks to overcome key obstacles preventing effective implementation and monitoring of their priorities.

The critical success factor for the effective management of think tanks is crucially linked to the retention of key quality middle-level and junior staff. Indeed, without the retention of quality staff for a relatively long time, the high turnover of staff will for sure reduce the long-term capacity of think tanks. It is therefore recommended for think tanks to ensure the maintenance of a corporate institutional memory outside the memory held by the Executive Director – who is usually the “face associated” with the think tank.

Sustainability of think tanks

Place capacity development at the core of development issues and think tanks’ activities for Africa’s sustainable development. Think tanks and their supporters are recommended to put capacity building as a top and permanent priority in their interventions, be it in terms of supporting countries and the various stakeholders or in strengthening the

capacities of the institutions to better contribute to Africa's socio-economic transformation. On one hand, think tanks should support the various capacity building interventions and increase the critical mass of capacities required for Africa's development. In fact, the majority of African countries have Medium capacity. Of the 45 countries surveyed in 2015, most (73.3 percent) fall within the Medium bracket, 17.8 percent are in the High bracket, and 8.9 percent are in the Low bracket. The results are mainly due to the poor capacity for implementation, suggesting prioritizing investments to improve the capacities of service delivery mechanisms at the sub-national and local levels to enable direct benefits for citizens' livelihoods (Munthali et al., 2019). Think tanks should support efforts toward improving capacities.

On the other hand, the capacity development of think tanks for bringing evidence into policy needs to go beyond technical research to include participative methods of creating evidence, facilitating participatory methods, and building alliances for better influence on policy. Besides conducting research or influencing policy, the capacities of think tanks need to be enhanced for them to be able to audit and legitimize policy, conduct training of future cadres of policymakers and policy analysts, support and mobilize resources in favor of specific political, social, or economic interests, create and maintain public spaces for debate and reflection, and raise awareness.

Channel resources to and provide the necessary financial and political support to African institutions with the mandate to strengthen institutional and human capacity and the long-lasting experience in developing think tanks on the continent. The recommendation is to encourage and advocate for the financial contribution of multilateral and bilateral partners, as well as, the private sector, toward capacity building initiatives, which are to be pooled and managed by institutions such as ACBF, exclusively created and with the experience to support capacity building, including the development of think tanks in Africa. Moreover, African governments are also to provide the highest and full political and financial support to ensure that institutions

like ACBF, with the experience and mandate to build capacities and develop think tanks in Africa, have the required resources to deliver on their mission.

As a capacity entity working for Africa, ACBF should exercise first level continental responsibility in continuing to promote capacity development, while ensuring that resources dedicated to capacity development are centralized efficiently and properly allocated for the development and support of think tanks. There is also need to work with global and continental partners to ensure that domestic resources are effectively mobilized to support capacity development initiatives for and by African think tanks.

References

Adebayo, B. (2023). Think Tanks in Africa Must Support Policymaking with Evidence. Nature Africa. Retrieved from: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d44148-023-00360-4>

African Development Bank (AfDB). (2024). African Economic Outlook 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.afdb.org/en/knowledge/publications/african-economic-outlook>

African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF). (2011) Africa Capacity Indicators Report 2011: Capacity Development in Fragile States.

———(2013). Evaluation of ACBF Supported Policy Centers and Think Tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa. Conducted by Dalberg Global Development Partners.

———(2014). Africa Capacity Report 2014: Capacity Imperatives for Regional Integration in Africa.

———(2015). Africa Capacity Report 2015: Capacity Imperatives for Domestic Resource Mobilization in Africa.

———(2017). Africa Capacity Report 2017: Building Capacity in Science, Technology and Innovation for Africa's Transformation.

———(2018). Lessons Notes on Capacity Development in Africa. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF).

———(2019). Africa Capacity Report 2019: Fostering Transformative Leadership for Africa's Development.

———(2024). Annual Report 2023. Retrieved from: https://www.acbf-pact.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/ACBF%20Annual%20Report%202023%20En-1_0.pdf

———(2025). Organizational Capacity Assessment of Think Tanks in Africa: Key Findings and Recommendations. CADAST Project.

African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) & African Union Commission (AUC). (2016). Capacity Requirements for the New African Vision Agenda 2063—“The Africa We Want”.

ACBF, AUC, ECA, & NEPAD. (2016). Creating a Sustainable Future for African Think Tanks in Support of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2063. Report of the Third Africa Think Tank Summit.

African Center for Equitable Development (ACED). (2024). Exploring the Challenges of African Think Tanks in Supporting Development Policies. Retrieved from: <https://acedafrica.org/en/exploring-the-challenges-of-african-think-tanks-in-supporting-development-policies/>

African Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS). (n.d.). Understanding Africa’s Emerging Cyber Threats. Retrieved from: <https://africacenter.org/programs/cyber/>

African Development Bank (AfDB). (2025). African Economic Outlook 2025. Retrieved from: <https://www.afdb.org/en/knowledge/publications/african-economic-outlook>

African Development Bank (AfDB), OECD & UNDP. (2016). African Economic Outlook 2016: Sustainable Cities and Structural Transformation.

African Economic Research Consortium (AERC). (2020). 53rd Plenary Session: The COVID-19 Pandemic & Public Finance in Africa – Challenges and Opportunities, 7 December (virtual).

Retrieved from: <https://www.africa.com/aerc-virtual-53rd-plenary-session-the-covid-19-pandemic-public-finance-in-africa-challenges-and-opportunities/>

African Leadership Magazine. (2024). African Think Tanks Driving Regional Policy Formulation. African Leadership Magazine, August. Retrieved from: <https://africanleadershipmagazine.co.uk>

African Union (2015). Agenda 2063: First Ten-Year Implementation Plan 2014–2023.

African Union (2020). Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030). Retrieved from: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/38507-doc-DTS_for_Africa_2020-2030_English.pdf

African Union (2023). Three Decades of Capacity Building in Africa: ACBF Looks Back at 32 Years of Service. Press Release, 3 April. Retrieved from: <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20230403/three-decades-capacity-building-africa-acbf-looks-back-32-years-service>

African Union Commission (AUC). (2022). AU Data Policy Framework. Retrieved from: <https://au.int/en/documents/20220728/au-data-policy-framework>

———(2024). Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy: Harnessing AI for Africa’s Development and Prosperity (July). Retrieved from: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44004-doc-EN-_Continental_AI_Strategy_July_2024.pdf

———(2025). Africa Think Tank Platform (ATTP) Project Summary. Retrieved from: https://au.int/sites/default/files/announcements/45137-annnc-2025-07-24_ATTP_Project_Summary_FINAL.pdf

African Union Commission & AUDA-NEPAD. (2022). Second Continental Report on the Implementation of Agenda 2063. Retrieved from: <https://au.int>

African Union Commission & AUDA-NEPAD. (2024a). Evaluation Report of Agenda 2063 First Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2014–2023).

African Union Commission & AUDA-NEPAD. (2024b). Agenda 2063: Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024–2033) – Launch version. Retrieved from: https://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/43517-wd-Agenda_2063_STYIP_Feb_2024_Launch_Version.pdf

African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD). (2024). Agenda 2063: Second Ten-Year Implementation Plan (2024–2033). Retrieved from: <https://www.nepad.org/publication/agenda-2063-second-ten-year-implementation-plan-2024-2033>

African Union & World Bank. (2025). African Think Tanks Platform Initiative (ATTP). Retrieved from: <https://capitalethiopia.com/2025/07/27/wb-au-launch-african-think-tanks-platform-to-drive-data-driven-policy-in-africa/>

Ambala, A. T. (2020). Adapting Digital Storytelling Methods to African Contexts: Insights from the Utaifa Project. *African Journalism Studies*, 41(4), 22–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1840413>

Ayotan, V. (2023). Six factors that can enable think tanks to develop. <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/sixfactors-that-can-enable-think-tanks-to-develop/>

Befani, B., & Mayne, J. (2014). Process Tracing and Contribution Analysis: A Combined Approach to Generative Causal Inference for Impact Evaluation. *IDS Bulletin*, 45(6), 17–36.

Belfrage, M., Frantz, C., Fabris, B., & Lorig, F. (2024). *Blueprinting Organ Donation?: A ?Policy-first? Approach for Developing Agent-based Models*. Presented at the The 19th annual Social Simulation Conference (SSC 2024) (SSC 2024). Krakow, Poland, Sep 16-20, 2024. Retrieved from <https://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:mau:diva-71386>

Bhorat, H., Signé, L., Asmal, Z., Monnakgotla, J., & Rooney, C. (2023). Digitalization and Digital Skills Gaps in Africa: An Empirical Profile. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Bhorat-et.-al-May-2023-Digitalization-and-digital-skills-in-Africa-2.pdf>

Blanchard, P., Comblon, V., Gubert, F., Robilliard, A.-S., Le Quentrec, E., & Rubrichi, S. (2025). Leveraging Mobile Phone Data to Understand Temporary Migration in Senegal. Hello Future (Orange), 3 April (updated 4 April). Retrieved from: <https://hellofuture.orange.com/en/leveraging-mobile-phone-data-to-understand-temporary-migration-in-senegal/>

Collaborative Impact. (2023). Contribution Tracing – Collaborative Impact. Retrieved from: <https://collabimimpact.org/contributiontracing>

Consortium pour la Recherche Économique et Sociale (CRES) & Forum p'ur l'Autonomisation Economique de Femmes en Afrique'de l'Ouest (FAUEFAO). (2024). Institutional Profile and Role in Policy Advisory. Retrieved from: https://www.faufefao.org/institutions_partena/cres/

Cres, ECDPM & ODI. (2013). Final Report of the External Evaluation of the Think Tank Initiative. September.

Cilliers, J. (2025). The Potential of Digitisation in Ghana. ISS African Futures Blog, 10 July. Retrieved from: <https://futures.issafrica.org/blog/2025/The-potential-of-digitisation-in-Ghana>

COEGA Development Corporation. (2016). The ECCAS Region: The Belly Belt of Africa. Africa's Trade Potential 2016.

Dalberg Global Development Partners. (2013). Evaluation of ACBF Supported Policy Centers and Think Tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa.

DataCalculus. (n.d.). Digital Transformation Impact in Think Tanks: Assessing the Impact of Digital Transformation in Think Tanks. Retrieved from: <https://datacalculus.com/en/blog/think-tanks/policy-project-manager/digital-transformation-impact-in-think-tanks>

De Boer, J. (2015). What Are Think Tanks Good For? United Nations University – Center for Policy Research.

Demes, P. (2009). The Role of Think Tank in Shaping EU Policies. Europe's World Online.

Diawara, B. (2015). African Think Tanks & Use of New Media and Technology. African Think Tank Network Blog, 12 November.

Duignan, P., & Gann, L. H. (1974). Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960, Vol. V: A Biographical Guide to Colonialism in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF). (2021). ESRF Annual Report 2021. Retrieved from: https://esrf.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/ESRF-Annual-Report2021_1-1.pdf

Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF). (2022). ESRF Annual Report 2022. Retrieved from: https://esrf.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ESRF_Annual_Report_2022.pdf

Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF). (2023). ESRF Annual Report 2023. Retrieved from: https://esrf.or.tz/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ESRF_Annual_Report_2023.pdf

Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC). (2022). Strategic Plan 2022/23–2026/27. Retrieved from: https://eprcug.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/EPRC-STRATEGIC-PLAN-2022-23-2026-27_.pdf

Ecofin Agency. (2025). Ghana to Move 16,000 Government Services Online by End of 2025. Ecofin Agency, 9 July. Retrieved from: <https://www.ecofinagency.com/news-digital/0907-47630-ghana-to-move-16-000-government-services-online-by-end-of-2025>

Elias, P., Adenike Shonowo, Alex de Sherbinin, Carolynne Hultquist, Finn Danielsen, Caren Cooper, Maria Mondardini, Elaine Faustman, Anne Browser, Jean-Bernard Minster, Martie van Deventer, Ioana Popescu, (2023). Mapping the Landscape of Citizen Science in Africa: Assessing Its Contributions to SDG 6 and SDG 11. *Citizen Science: Theory and Practice*, 8(1), 33, 1–13. doi:10.5334/cstp.601

Esso, L. J. (2009). Dynamique des recettes du café et du cacao de la Côte d’Ivoire. PED N° 10/2008. Cellule d’Analyse de Politiques Economiques du CIRES, July.

ESSENCE & UKCDR. (2022). Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships. Retrieved from: <https://tdr.who.int/publications/m/item/2022-09-07-four-approaches-to-supporting-equitable-research-partnerships>

Forbes. (2023). The 6 Pillars of Leadership and Team Alignment. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/.../the-6-pillars-of-leadership-and-team-alignment/>

Ford, N. (2014). African Think-Tanks: Practical Solutions to Practical Problems. *African Business*, November.

Gabre-Madhin, E. Z., & Goggin, I. (2005). Does Ethiopia Need a Commodity Exchange? An Integrated Approach to Market Development. EDRI-ESSP Policy Working Paper No. 4.

Gieske, H., van Buuren, A., & Bekkers, V. (2016). Conceptualizing Public Innovative Capacity: A Framework for Assessment. *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 21(1), 1–25.

Global Research & Technology Development (GRTD). (2024). Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO): About the Research Commissioning Centre. Retrieved from: <https://www.grtd.fcdo.gov.uk/about-rcc/>

Goko, C. (2025). World Bank Backs Africa Digital Data Push with \$100 Million Raxio Deal. Reuters, 3 April. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/world-bank-backs-africa-digital-data-push-with-100-million-raxio-deal-2025-04-03/>

Governance Action Hub (GAH). (2024). Think Tank Innovation: New Approaches & Strategies. Retrieved from: <https://governanceactionhub.org/rethinking-the-role-and-strategies-of-think-tanks/>

Harvard Business Review (HBR). (2021). Supercharging Company Knowledge with AI. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2021/03/supercharging-company-knowledge-with-ai>

Harvey, S., Millett, B., & Smith, D. (1998). Developing Successful Teams in Organisations. *Australian Journal of Management & Organisational Behaviour*, 1(1), 1–8.

Hugo, V. (1877). *Histoire d'un Crime: Déposition d'un Témoin*.

Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). (2025). About Us. Retrieved from: <https://hsrc.ac.za/>

iAfrica.com. (2025). PlantVillage – AI for Crop Disease Detection in Kenya. iAfrica.com, 29 April (updated 12 June). Retrieved from: <https://iafrica.com/plantvillage-ai-for-crop-disease-detection-in-kenya/>

Institute of Development Studies (IDS). (2024). Supporting African Think Tanks Makes Sense – And Why More Support Is Needed. Retrieved from: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/supporting-african-think-tanks-makes-sense-and-why-more-support-is-needed/>

Ijjasz-Vasquez, E., & Ordu, A. U. (2022). Breaking Silos Between Think Tanks and Youth Groups for Climate Change Action in Africa. Brookings Institution, 30 November. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/breaking-silos-between-think-tanks-and-youth-groups-for-climate-change-action-in-africa/>

International Monetary Fund (IMF). (2024). *Regional Economic Outlook for Sub-Saharan Africa: April 2024*. Retrieved from: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA/Issues/2024/04/19/regional-economic-outlook-for-sub-saharan-africa-april-2024>

———(2024). World Economic Outlook 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO>

———(2025). Regional Economic Outlook: Sub-Saharan Africa – Light at the End of the Tunnel? Retrieved from: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/SSA/Issues/2025/04/10/regional-economic-outlook-april-2025-sub-saharan-africa>

International Development Research Centre (IDRC). (2014). Capacity Development Within the Think Tank Initiative: A Review with Strategic Recommendations. Final Report.

———(2019). Think Tank Initiative Final Report. Retrieved from: <https://idrc-crdi.ca/en/initiative/think-tank-initiative>

Jones, H. (2024). Theories of Change: A Guide to Monitoring and Evaluating Policy Influence. ODI Practitioner Briefing. Retrieved from: <https://www.researchtoaction.org/2024/09/theories-of-change-a-guide-to-monitoring-and-evaluating-policy-influence/>

Kakooei, M., Bailie, J., Söderberg, A., Becevic, A., & Daoud, A. (2024). Mapping Africa Settlements: High-Resolution Urban and Rural Map by Deep Learning and Satellite Imagery. arXiv, November 5. doi:10.48550/arXiv.2411.02935

KICTANet. (2021). Public Participation: KICTANet Report.

KICTANet. (2025). KICTANet at DRIF25: Implementing the African Union Data Policy Framework. Retrieved from: <https://www.kictanet.or.ke/kictanet-at-drif25-implementing-the-african-union-data-policy-framework/>

Kimenyi, M. S., & Datta, A. (2011). Think Tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa: How the Political Landscape Has Influenced Their Origins. ODI Research Reports and Studies, December.

Kitchin, R. (2014). The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures and Their Consequences.

Kouladoun, J. C., et al. (2023). Digital Infrastructural Development and Inclusive Growth in Sub-Saharan Africa. Journal of Social and Economic Development. doi:10.1007/s40847-023-00240-5

Lai, S., Zu Erbach-Schoenberg, E., Pezzulo, C., Ruktanonchai, N. W., Sorichetta, A., Steele, J., Li, T., Dooley, C. A., & Tatem, A. J. (2019). Exploring the Use of Mobile Phone Data for National Migration Statistics. Palgrave Communications, 5(34). doi:10.1057/s41599-019-0242-9

Lavelle-Hill, R., Harvey, J., Smith, G., et al. (2022). Using Mobile Money Data and Call Detail Records to Explore the Risks of Urban Migration in Tanzania. EPJ Data Science, 11(28). doi:10.1140/epjds/s13688-022-00340-y

Linard, C., Gilbert, M., Snow, R. W., Noor, A. M., & Tatem, A. J. (2012). Population Distribution, Settlement Patterns and

Accessibility Across Africa in 2010. PLoS ONE, 7(2), e31743. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0031743

Malan, B. B. (2009). Structure du marché national du café-cacao et prix au producteur. PED N° 06/2008. Cellule d'Analyse de Politiques Economiques du CIRES, April.

Mardillu, E. S. (2023). Edge AI for All: Breaking Down Language and Connectivity Barriers in Rural Africa. Retrieved from: https://openreview.net/pdf?id=Cm5GZm59q7&utm_source

Mbadlanyana, T. (2024). Shaping African Futures: Think-Tanks and the Need for Endogenous Knowledge Production in Sub-Saharan Africa.

McGann, J. G. (2007). Think Tanks and Policy Advice in the U.S.: Academics, Advisors, and Advocates.

McGann, J. G. (2020). Global Think Tanks: Policy Networks and Governan^{ce} (2nd ed.).

McGann, J. G., & Weaver, R. K. (2000). Think Tanks & Civil Societies: Catalysts for Ideas and Action.

McKinsey & Company. (2024). The State of Organizations in 2023: Ten Shifts Transforming Organizations. Retrieved from: <https://www.mckinsey.com/.../the-state-of-organizations-2023.pdf>

MDPI – Consiglio, C., Massa, N., Sommovigo, V., & Fusco, L. (2023). Techno-Stress Creators, Burnout and Psychological Health among Remote Workers during the Pandemic: The Moderating Role of E-Work Self-Efficacy. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20(22), 7051. doi:10.3390/ijerph20227051

———(2018). An Interview with Peter Da Costa on Evidence-Informed Policy and More. Retrieved from: <https://>

onthinktanks.org/articles/an-interview-with-peter-da-costa-on-evidence-informed-policy-and-more/

Mensa, J. (2015). The IEA Presidential Debates: 15 Years of Upholding Electoral Accountability. On Think Tanks Blog, 13 February. Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/the-iea-presidential-debates-15-years-of-upholding-electoral-accountability/>

Mo Ibrahim Foundation. (2023). The Power of Data for Governance: IIAG Series 2023 Report. Retrieved from: <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation/sites/default/files/2024-01/2023-iiag-series-report.pdf>

Munthali, T., Diawara, B., Zimhunga, A. (2019). Capacity Building for Africa's Transformation: A Review of Priorities and Research Needs. In: Chrysostome, E. (eds) Capacity Building in Developing and Emerging Countries. Contributions to Management Science. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16740-0_4

Ndibalema, P. (2025). Digital Literacy Gaps in Promoting 21st-Century Skills Among Students in Higher Education Institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review. Cogent Education, 12(1). doi:10.1080/2331186X.2025.2452085

Ngugi, R. (2021). Think Tanks in the Context of Africa's Development. In J. G. McGann (Ed.), The Future of Think Tanks and Policy Advice Around the World (pp. 63–76). Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-60379-3_6

Nkafu Policy Institute. (2023). Report of the 2023 Central Africa Think Tank Forum: Building Knowledge Societies for Sustainable Development in Central Africa. Retrieved from: https://nkafu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/En_Report-of-2023-Central-Africa-Think-Tank-Forum.pdf

Nqobile Dlodla. (2025). Visa Opens First Africa Data Centre in Johannesburg. Reuters, 23 July. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/visa-opens-first-africa-data-centre-johannesburg-2025-07-23/>

OECD Development Centre & African Development Bank (AfDB). (2016). African Economic Outlook 2016: Sustainable Cities and Structural Transformation

OECD. (2023a). OECD Science, Technology and Innovation Outlook 2023: Enabling Transitions in Times of Disruption.

———(2023b). Development Co-operation Report 2023: Debating the Aid System.

Ofori, B. (2017). The Role of Think Tanks in a Democracy. Modern Ghana, 26 March. Retrieved from: <https://www.modernghana.com/news/764356/the-role-of-think-tanks-in-a-democracy.html>

Ogenga, F., & Stanley, A. (2024). Regulating Artificial Intelligence in Africa: Strategies and Insights from Kenya, Ghana, and the African Union. Wilson Center, 18 September. Retrieved from: <https://infosphereinvaders.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/regulating-artificial-intelligence-africa-strategies-and-insights-kenya-ghana-and-african>

Ohemeng, F. L. K. (2025). “The State of Policy Capacity Problems in Africa: The Viewpoint of Historical Institutionalism From Ghana.” Review of Policy Research 1–16.

On Think Tanks (OTT). (2017). Think Tank Governance and Management Series. Retrieved from: https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/OTT_Series_GovMngmt_ISSUU.pdf

- (2022). State of the Sector Report 2022. Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/reports/think-tank-state-of-the-sector-2022/>
- (2023). Think Tank State of the Sector 2023. Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/SoS-2023-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- (2024a). Exploring the Challenges of African Think Tanks in Supporting Development Policies. Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/exploring-the-challenges-of-african-think-tanks-in-supporting-development-policies/>
- (2024b). Contribution of Sub-Saharan African Think Tanks to Public Policies and Societal Debates. Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/african-think-tanks-policies-debates/>
- (2024c). State of the Sector Report 2024. Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/OTT-SotS-2024-Aug-3.pdf>
- (2025a). Why Are Sub-Saharan African Think Tanks Optimistic Amidst Political Polarisation? Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/sub-saharan-african-think-tanks-polarisation/>
- (2025b). Exploring the Challenges of African Think Tanks in Supporting Development Policies. Retrieved from: <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/exploring-the-challenges-of-african-think-tanks-in-supporting-development-policies/>
- (2025c). Think Tank Governance and Management—Latest Reflections. Retrieved from: <https://r4d.org/resources/practical-guidance-think-tank-directors-managers-donors/>

Ramezani, M., Takian, A., Bakhtiari, A., et al. (2023). The Application of Artificial Intelligence in Health Policy: A Scoping Review. *BMC Health Services Research*, 23, 1416. doi:10.1186/s12913-023-10462-2

Rasmussen, A., & Panke, D. (2016). The Role of Think Tanks in the EU Policy Process Remains Largely Uncharted Territory for Political Science. *LSE EUROPP Blog*. Retrieved from: <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/71709/1/blogs.lse.ac.uk-The%20role%20of%20think-tanks%20in%20the%20EU%20policy%20process%20remains%20largely%20uncharted%20territory%20for%20political%20sc.pdf>

Rasheed, S. (1994). Social Sciences and Policy-Making in Africa: A Critical Review. *Africa Development*, 19(1), 91–118.

Raithatha, R., & Storchi, G. (2025). The State of the Industry Report on Mobile Money 2025. GSMA, April. Retrieved from: https://www.gsma.com/sotir/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/The-State-of-the-Industry-Report-2025_English.pdf

Republic of Kenya. (2012). Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis Act Cap 225D.

Reuters. (2024). African Progress Backslides as Coups and War Persist. Reuters, 22 October. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/african-progress-backslides-coups-war-persist-2024-10-22/>

Russell, S. N., Rao Graham, L., & McNaughton, M. (2024). Mining Social Media Data to Inform Public Health Policies: A Sentiment Analysis Case Study. *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública*, 48, e79. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC11648203/>

Sabinet. (2025). Supporting an Independent African Think Tank on Digital Policy. Sabinet Case Study, 14 April. Retrieved from:

<https://sabinet.co.za/case-study-supporting-an-independent-african-think-tank-on-digital-policy/>

Salami, A. O. (2024). Artificial Intelligence, Digital Colonialism, and the Implications for Africa's Future Development. *Data & Policy*, 6, e67. doi:10.1017/dap.2024.75

Saxena, A. (2024). AI in Governance and Policy Making. *International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)*, 13, 1218–1223. doi:10.21275/SR24519015426

Schilirò, D. (2024). Digital Transformation and Its Impact on Organizations. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 19(6), 71. doi:10.5539/ijbm.v19n6p71

Spruce, J., Moriarty, S., & Norcross, C. (2024). The Post-COVID Design Studio: New Tools, New Rules? *Design Science*, 10. doi:10.1017/dsj.2024.46

Stone, D. (2005). Knowledge Networks and Global Policy. In D. Stone & S. Maxwell (Eds.), *Global Knowledge Networks and International Development*.

Struyk, R. (2006). *Managing Think Tanks: Practical Guide for Maturing Organizations* (2nd ed.).

Subotić, S. (2018). A Special Role for Think Tanks? *European Policy Centre (CEP) Blog*, 19 June. Retrieved from: <https://cep.org.rs/en/blog/a-special-role-for-think-tanks/>

Szomszor, M., & Adie, E. (2022). Overton – A Bibliometric Database of Policy Document Citations. *arXiv preprint*, January. Retrieved from: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2201.07643>

Tao, Sile & Bragazzi, Nicola & Wu, Jianhong & Mellado, Bruce & Kong, Jude. (2022). Harnessing Artificial Intelligence to assess the impact of nonpharmaceutical interventions on the second

wave of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 pandemic across the world. Scientific Reports. 12. 10.1038/s41598-021-04731-5.

Taylor, P., & Ormeño Oviedo, M. A. (2025). African Regional Economic Policy-Making: Understanding and Catalysing the Potentials of Think Tanks. Development Policy Review. Retrieved from: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/dpr.70019>

Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF). (2025a). The Continental Response. In AI Governance for Africa Toolkit – Part 2: Emerging AI Governance in Africa. Retrieved from: <https://www.trust.org/toolkit/part-2-emerging-ai-governance-in-africa/the-continental-response/>

Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI). (2022). Cybersecurity in Africa: What Should African Leaders Do to Strengthen the Digital Economy? TBI Insight, 24 January. Retrieved from: <https://institute.global/insights/tech-and-digitalisation/how-rethink-cybersecurity-africa-strengthen-digital-economy>

UKCDR & ESSENCE. (2022). Four Approaches to Supporting Equitable Research Partnerships. Retrieved from: <https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/resource/four-approaches-to-supporting-equitable-research-partnerships/>

———(2021). Digital Economy Report 2021: Cross-Border Data Flows and Development: For Whom the Data Flow. Retrieved from: <https://unctad.org/publication/digital-economy-report-2021>

United Nations Development Programme & International Monetary Fund (UNDP & IMF). (2025). *Sub-Saharan Africa's Economic Outlook 2025: Insights from IMF's April 2025 Regional Economic Outlook*. Retrieved from: https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-05/implication_of_imf_ssa_outlook_april_2025_insights_2-1.pdf

United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). (2023). Economic Report on Africa 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.uneca.org/publications>

——— (2025). *Africa: Foreign Investment Hit Record High in 2024*. Retrieved from: <https://unctad.org/press-material/africa-foreign-investment-hit-record-high-2024>

United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD). (2025). Youth Literacy in Sub-Saharan Africa: 2014–2024 Trends. In SDG Indicators Report 2025. Retrieved from: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2025/Goal-04/>

USAID. (2013). Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool.

USAID-SERA. (2015). Year 4 Annual Report (October 2014–September 2015) and Quarter 16 Progress Report (July–September 2015). Retrieved from: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M6SW.pdf

Versi, A. (2016). Time for Leaner, Fitter Think-Tanks. New African, May.

Viljoen, L., & Fourie, M. (2022). Netnography: An Under-Applied Research Method. South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences, 25(1), 1–11. Retrieved from: <https://sajems.org/index.php/sajems/article/view/4891>

Wambe, N.E. (2025). The Dynamics of Public Policy Effectiveness in Africa: Between Intentions and Realities. Open Journal of Social Sciences, 13, 454–467.

Wasafiri Hub. (2025). Monitoring, Learning and Evaluation for a Complex World. Wasafiri Hub Blog, 11 June. Retrieved from: <https://wasafirihub.com/blog/monitoring-learning-and-evaluation-for-a-complex-world/>

Weaver, K. R. (1989). The Changing World of Think Tanks. PS: Political Science and Politics, 563–578.

World Bank. (2018). Implementation Completion and Results Report: AFCC2/RI-ACBF Regional Capacity Building Project (P122478). Retrieved from: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/394901537213353814/pdf/ICR00004380-08312018.pdf>

———(2022). Strengthening African Regional Economic Policy Making Through Evidence: Opportunities and Challenges for Think Tanks and Their Supporters. Retrieved from: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099013411012422419>

World Bank. (2024). Global Economic Prospects Report 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects>

———(2023a). From Connectivity to Services: Digital Transformation in Africa. World Bank Results Brief, 26 June. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2023/06/26/from-connectivity-to-services-digital-transformation-in-africa>

———(2023b). Maintaining Momentum of Financial Inclusion Through Digital Adoption in the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). World Bank Blogs: All About Finance, 22 May. Retrieved from: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/allaboutfinance/maintaining-momentum-financial-inclusion-through-digital-adoption-west-african>

World Bank. (2024). Digital Transformation Drives Development in Africa. World Bank Results Brief, 18 January. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2024/01/18/digital-transformation-drives-development-in-afe-afw-africa>

World Bank (n.d.). Strengthening African Regional Economic Policy Making Through Evidence: Opportunities and Challenges for Think Tanks and Their Supporters. Retrieved from: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099013411012422419>

World Bank & African Union (AU). (2025). African Think Tanks Platform Initiative (ATTP). Retrieved from: <https://capitalethiopia.com/2025/07/27/wb-au-launch-african-think-tanks-platform-to-drive-data-driven-policy-in-africa/>

World Health Organization (WHO). (2022). Tracking Universal Health Coverage in the African Region 2022: Health Metrics and Outcomes. Retrieved from: <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/africa-gain-in-healthy-life-expectancy/>

World Health Organization (WHO). (2025). African Region's Maternal and Newborn Mortality Declining, but Progress Still Slow. 8 April. Retrieved from: <https://www.afro.who.int/news/african>

ZIMBISA. (2016). Business Enabling Environment Programme (BEEP).

Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCodd). (2025). Sustaining Civic Voices in Zimbabwe Amid Shifting Global Funding: Strategies for Resilience. Retrieved from: <https://zimcodd.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Opinion-Sustaining-Civic-Voices-in-Zimbabwe-Amid-Shifting-Global-Funding-Strategies-for-Resilience-.pdf>

Africa's future depends on ideas that can drive action. Think tanks are central to this mission—bridging research, policy, and practice. *Creation, Management and Sustainability of Think Tanks in Africa* offers the first comprehensive look at how these institutions emerge, operate, and endure across the continent.

From South Africa to Kenya, Nigeria to Zimbabwe, the book showcases diverse models and experiences, highlighting both achievements and persistent challenges—from fragile funding and political pressures to weak institutional capacities. It also explores why regions like Central Africa remain underserved, and how opportunities in Agenda 2063, regional integration, and Africa's youthful talent pool can be harnessed.

With rich case studies and practical insights, this volume is both a scholarly resource and a practical guide for policymakers, researchers, and development partners. It makes a compelling case: sustainable African think tanks are essential to shaping evidence-based policies and securing the continent's long-term transformation.