

SYNTHESIS OF CONTRIBUTIONS ON THE E-DIALOGUE “CAPACITY BUILDING FOR RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY INFLUENCE, ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS IN AFRICA”

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Introduction

The topic was selected following the growing interest among Policy Research Institutions (PRIs) in Africa including universities, R&D Institutions/organizations, non-profit organisations and civil society to use research-based evidence to influence public policies at national, regional and global levels. In our current topic, the discussions were guided by the following questions:

1. Do the Policy and Research Institutions (PRIs) in Africa really have the capacity to undertake research based evidence?
2. If the capacity is there, is their research even being utilised by policy makers and
3. Is there enough capacity for Africa think tanks to communicate, advocate and influence policies in Africa?

The discussions were shared by many members from different organizations across the world which among others included:

Claremont Graduate University USA, and Research for Poverty Alleviation (REPOA) drawing experiences from Tanzania; Uganda; Institute of Policy Analysis and Research (IPAR) drawing experiences from Kenya; Participatory Development Associates (PDA) Ltd drawing lessons from Ghana; Open University, UK drawing lessons from Ghana;

Observations

Some argued that many African policy and research institutions have adequate capacity to undertake evidence based research, but the utilization of the findings remains a challenge. They argued that most policy makers do not utilize the findings and evidence from research not only due to the lack of, or limited capacity (i.e. technical, institutional, financial) to translate the research findings into practice, especially if it entails transformation in policy direction but also the fear of change has led to some policy makers maintaining the status quo at any cost for many years. The discussions also noted that many think-tanks of African origin in Africa have a lot of capacity and skills to communicate, advocate and influence policy decisions but they need to build

synergy and partnerships so as to reduce duplication of work (i.e. researching on the same themes/topics and target beneficiaries, etc); and reduce wastage of resources (time, energy, financial). The thinking of if there could be established the national and sub-regional (e.g. EAC, SADC, ECOWAS, IGAD, etc) research networks, under one roof i.e. Africa Region Research Network; it could derive to the effectiveness of the utilisation of the research findings.

The shortage of Policy and Research Institutions in Africa given the huge demand for evidence-based research was considered another problem. What also came out in the discussions was that even the available PRIs are limited to specialisations in just some few sectors of social, economic and political development, while others are not covered because of either a shortage of personnel or the technical expertise in areas like agriculture and industry etc which have been left to specialised research institutions mostly academic oriented without an inclination to informing policy. The problem of coping with real-time evidence-based research was discussed as another problem and was mainly due to the shortage of funding; reliance on donor-funding which is sometimes not forthcoming; lack of technical expertise in other sectors; and where there is technical expertise, they prefer to look for better paying jobs than relying on the poorly remunerated research jobs in the PRIs.

It was argued that, although in some cases the PRIs have been at the forefront in setting the research agenda, but due to other factors like political interference and untimeliness of the research, very little find its way to the top of agenda of the policy makers. Moreover, in some cases the researches are dictated either by the mood of the country or the demands of the funding institutions. Some cases were drawn from different African countries where evidence-based findings are not easily palatable to the political elite because they go against the party policies and in such instances, it is difficult for the policy makers to utilise such findings. In view of this it was noted that policy makers in most instances prefer commissioned research findings so that the findings have to be bent on the expectations of the commissioning agent and in this regard the PRIs needs to 'doctor the evidence' to be in compliance with the expectations of the policy makers – It is therefore cautioned that "Is it really evidence-based research"? Another tragedy for the PRIs in Africa was said to be the presence of the government-owned PRIs where the policy makers consume the findings from their 'own' PRIs whether it is evidence-based or not, and leave out 'evidence-based findings' from the non-government-owned PRIs.

It was also argued that there is little capacity for the African think tanks to communicate, advocate and influence policies. Notably, PRIs partner with CSOs for the purpose to obtain effective research communication and advocacy, but this again has not been very effective because the civil society agenda and the PRIs policy agenda in most cases do not converge. The civil society readily gets funding for advocacy, but usually on current and topical issues. Because of their limited capacity for research, they have always commissioned researchers from the think tanks to carry out research that advice their advocacy topic. This has meant that the think tanks cannot dictate the research for communication and advocacy.

Another problem was said to concern the academic elite that frequent find their way into government committees and task forces, where they can offer their technical expertise in the respective fields and decide to detach themselves from the think-tank tag when undertaking such assignments, precisely for pure monetary gains.

Platforms such as EBPDN were commended as critical instruments for sharing best practices and comparing examples from the respective countries. Through this, a think tank in different institutions (within and between countries) will be able to learn about the weaknesses of an approach to influence policy by a think tank and through this, design strategies of communication that will avoid the weakness. The think tanks will also be able to share their successes which can be replicated by other think tanks elsewhere taking into account the local context.

Finally the role of media for research findings dissemination and communication was given weight on the ground outreach for communicating to the public. PRIs are urged to establish formal linkages with the media as an alternative for communicating the findings, advocacy and evidence-based policy influence. Given the important role the media it play in dissemination and communication of the research findings, the capacity building for media, PRIs and policy makers is essentially required.

Recommendations

The brief provided some strategies that can improve the capacity of the PRIs think tanks in Africa in communicating, advocating and evidence-based policy influence as follows:

- (i) Partnerships and collaborations between different institutions in and outside the region to enable the institutions concerned to tap into the

expertise of others as well as pooling of resources that can facilitate research output dissemination and influence on policies.

- (ii) Supplying additional financial and physical resources to fill the gap that constrain the growth of capacity and the improvement of performance.
- (iii) Provision of access to networks and worldwide body of knowledge through the use of Information Communication Technology to improve information sharing and knowledge of Africa PRIs.
- (iv) Training and retraining of high-quality researchers to improve or create the technical, personal or organizational abilities of the organization, to do better in their research exploits.
- (v) Provision of tailored-training on communication strategies to foster a greater awareness of how policymakers use research information and the constraints within which most policymakers operate.
- (vi) Improvement in infrastructure and exposure to ICT needed by researchers to undertake and communicate research outputs to policy makers.
- (vii) Collaboration with media in transmitting and publicising evidence that can inform policy making and enhance timely publishing of research information.

- (viii) Partnerships and collaboration between research organisations and policy makers. Undertaking collaborative research partnerships between research organisations and policy makers is considered potential for overcoming the disparity between issues investigated by researchers and policy makers' actual research priority areas and facilitate uptake of research findings.
- (ix) Building PRIs skills in ways of using appropriate evidence and direct communication channels such as face-to-face deliberation of research findings with policy-makers through policy panels and briefing discussions, lobbying and press conferences.
- (x) Advancing knowledge in Policy formulation processes for PRIs in Africa to develop an understanding and knowledge of both the formal and informal institutions and actors involved in policy processes to identify the spaces through which influence can be exerted on policy formulation.
- (xi) Capacity for improving and maintaining networks for PRIs to develop effective links and trust-based relationships with policymakers, the media and other stakeholders for them to engage fully with policy processes.

Along this topic, more cases were bought up for discussion. Among the critical ones that still seek responses are:

- The Tragedy that is Research Capacity in Africa!
- Of African Think-Tanks and Defining the African Researcher
- United Kingdom and Evidence-based Policy: What Lessons from the Riots etc?