



Think tanks in sub-Saharan Africa

How the political landscape has influenced their
origins

Mwangi S. Kimenyi and Ajoy Datta

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Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD, UK

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399
www.odi.org.uk

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Abbreviations

AU	African Union
CEN-SAD	Community of Sahel-Saharan States
CPP	Convention People's Party (Ghana)
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFID	UK Department for International Development
EAC	East African Community
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GTZ	German Technical Cooperation
HIPC	Heavily Indebted Poor Countries
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KANU	Kenya African National Union
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
R&D	Research and Development
RAPID	Research and Policy in Development
REC	Regional Economic Community
SACU	South African Customs Union
SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
Sida	Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation
TTI	Think Tank Initiative
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organization

1 Introduction

Donors are pouring increasing amounts of money into supporting think-tanks in the developing world, in the hope that these will improve policy processes while at the same time placing strong emphasis on value for money. The Think Tank Initiative's (TTI's) recent annual report highlights a continued focus on supporting a US-style model of independent think-tanks (TTI, 2010). This seems to be based on an enduring belief that think-tanks were first founded in the US (with smaller numbers in other parts of the Western world), and since the 1970s have shot up in number across the globe, mirroring their US counterparts. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has been challenging in recent years these assumptions, arguing that, in Latin America, think-tanks are by no means a novel phenomenon (Mendizabal, 2008). They have been around in various forms for a long time – as academic societies in Peru in the 1790s and liberal and conservative newspapers in Colombia in the second half of the 19th century. And while providing policy advice is perhaps their underlying purpose, think-tanks have had and can have other purposes too – for instance legitimising government or party policies or existing as a space for debate.

Building on research on think-tanks and political parties in Latin America (Mendizabal and Sample, 2009), ODI's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme set out to investigate the relationship between think-tanks and politics in other regions. This has yielded two papers to date, one on think-tanks in East Asia (Nachiappan et al, 2010) and another on Bolivia (Bueno and Datta, 2011), particularly in the context of Evo Morales' rise to power. This paper explores the relationship between think-tanks and politics in sub-Saharan Africa. It tests the hypothesis that different types of think-tanks existed in the region before so-called 'independent' US-style think-tanks emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, and that the character and activities of these, as well as the types of knowledge they produce, have been influenced primarily by the prevailing political environment.

As in previous studies, we describe think-tanks broadly as 'organisations' that produce research products with the aim of informing policy debates. Using a functional definition greatly expands the types of organisation we can include in our analysis. We go beyond non-governmental organisation (NGO) think-tanks to look at government-affiliated research institutes, university research centres, consultancies, informal groups of academics and individuals who advise governments, such as intellectuals, consultants and foreign experts.

Rather than starting with the think-tank as the central unit of analysis, we first focus on the political environment and identify how this has influenced the character of think-tanks. Drawing on an exploratory review of the literature, we try to capture the broad political context across sub-Saharan Africa over the past five decades and assess what impact, if any, this has had on the origin and development of think-tanks. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 looks at four distinct phases of political development: colonial rule up to the 1950s and 1960s; independence and single-party rule in the 1960s and 1970s; authoritarian/military rule in the 1970s and 1980s; and political and economic reform (or globalisation, as some say) in the 1980s and 1990s. The section ends by identifying key dimensions that have shaped the context, which are used in Section 3 to discuss the emergence of various forms of think-tank. Rather than simply providing a comprehensive overview of politics in the region and how this has influenced think-tank development, we aim to plot a narrative to explore possible linkages. Section 4 concludes and highlights areas for further research.

2 The political landscape in sub-Saharan Africa

This section provides a brief overview of sub-Saharan Africa's political development over the past 50-60 years. We identify and describe four distinct phases:

- Colonialism;
- Post-independence and single-party rule;
- Authoritarian/military rule; and
- Political and economic liberalisation.

Although we use the categorisation above, there are a number of caveats to bear in mind. These phases did not occur simultaneously across the various countries. For example, some countries, such as Ghana and Guinea, achieved political independence in the 1950s; others, such as Zimbabwe and Namibia, were still under colonial rule in the 1980s.¹ In addition, it is also important to note that political development in each sub-Saharan African country has by no means been linear. Many countries have experienced reversals, such as transitions to autocratic rule after democratic reforms. For example, Nigeria had a series of coups between 1966 and 1999, with a brief intermission of civilian rule between 1979 and 1983 (what was called the Second Republic).

2.1 Colonial rule

Many Western European nations had colonies in Africa, but the two most prominent powers were France and Britain. French colonial policy in Africa promoted direct rule, and generally was characterised by either assimilation or association.² The policy of assimilation implied that the right to freedom, equality and fraternity should apply to anyone who was French, regardless of race or colour.

For example, rights to citizenship, including political rights, were extended to some in Senegal. However, the French colonial administration applied these ideals to only a very small number of the African elite in the country: they wanted to ensure that this small, but influential, group was satisfied with the *status quo* and would refrain from promoting any anti-French sentiments. Elite groups consisted mainly of local chiefs and a small number of intellectuals, who could help to ensure that French policies were implemented with minimal resistance.

The African elite were provided with basic education; some received skills training in agriculture or medicine and a few were even educated in France. In addition, these 'assimilated' Africans were allowed to select a council-general to represent them in France on various issues. However, in practice, council-generals had very little input into policy decisions.

Elsewhere in Africa, the French authorities chose to adopt a policy of association. Across the majority of colonies, policies were directed by the Minister of Colonies and the government in Paris. French lieutenant-governors based in colonies reported to and received their orders from the mainland, with little or no consultation with the African elite; thus colonial policies were formulated largely in Paris. As a result of this highly centralised policy-making process, administration in French territories was fairly uniform throughout Africa.

¹ The African political landscape therefore remains diverse and presents a good natural laboratory to study how think-tank functions are conducted under different political systems.

² The French assimilation concept was based on the idea of expanding French culture to the colonies outside France in the 19th and 20th century. Natives of these colonies were considered French citizens as long as they adopted French culture and customs. This also meant they would have the rights and duties of French citizens. Association, as an intellectual concept, viewed Africans as inextricably wedded to the past and incapable of attaining the level of French political and social forms. Association took root in twin assumptions: 1) that French social and political organisation represented the pinnacle of cultural achievement and 2) that Africans could never quite achieve that pinnacle (see <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/5923/Africa-French-Colonies.html>).

Meanwhile, British policy in sub-Saharan Africa was broadly characterised by indirect rule, as advocated for by Lord Lugard.³ In this system, power was delegated to local chiefs and others with pre-existing claims to power. According to the proponents of indirect rule, order and stability could be maintained only by avoiding disruptions and promoting continuity. Local rulers were selected if they were sympathetic to British interests and were given limited decision-making powers on low-level administrative matters. Local chiefs were in charge of mostly routine governmental activities, such as tax collection, resolving local disputes and, most importantly, quelling anti-British feeling among the people.

Using this method, the British did not have to expend any more effort than was necessary to control their African colonies, and consequently kept both their financial and personnel costs to a minimum (Lugard, 1922). As with the French policy of association, British colonial officers reported to and received orders from the government in London. The primary role of the local rulers was to enforce these, as dictated to them by the local colonial officer. This meant that, while the system of indirect rule allowed local chiefs to have some say in lower-level administrative matters, key policy decisions were ultimately still made in London without their input. The British system of indirect rule may have allowed local pre-colonial leaders a greater say than their counterparts in the French system in the administration of colonial policy, but in neither system were Africans included in the formal policy-making process.

2.2 Post-independence single-party/authoritarian rule

Although the African elite did not have any significant influence on colonial policy, they did play a crucial role in the transition period. In many countries, it was the elite or intellectuals who fought for and helped achieved independence. Small groups of intellectuals, educated by Britain and France, established political parties and led movements against the European colonial powers. Ghana's independence from Britain in 1957, followed by the independence of Guinea from France in 1958, set in play a domino effect across Africa: by 1969, the majority of African countries were independent from colonial rule. This group of intellectuals helped to advance the various political ideologies that dominated policy-making in the early years of independence. However, African governments also relied heavily on foreign experts and intellectuals for ideological inspiration and affirmation.

What little political competition existed in the period leading up to independence quickly disappeared in most African countries shortly after independence. The new leaders, with a desire to consolidate power, often banned political competition (Kimenyi and Mbaku, 1996). This was said to encourage tribalism, as political parties tended to be aligned with one or other ethnic or tribal group.⁴ In Ghana, for example, the Convention People's Party (CPP) led by Kwame Nkrumah slid quickly into single-party rule until it was overthrown in 1966 by the Ghanaian army. In Kenya, a constitutional amendment changed the country to a *de jure* single-party state under the ruling Kenya African National Union (KANU). Even where the law permitted multi-party politics, countries remained *de facto* single-party states, as attempts to introduce party competition were often met with intimidation and force. By and large, policy-making in the post independence period, from the late 1950s to the 1970s, was dominated by ruling parties, particularly presidents or the 'big man', with little input from other groups in society.

As regimes became increasingly repressive and predatory, ethnic and religious divisions widened. Those in power tended to favour members of their own ethnic and religious group

³ Britain had many colonies in sub-Saharan Africa: The Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, Southern Cameroon and Sierra Leone in West Africa; Kenya, Tanzania (formerly Tanganyika and Zanzibar) and Uganda in East Africa; and Botswana, Lesotho, Nyasaland (Malawi), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), South Africa and Swaziland in South Africa.

⁴ There is credibility in this claim, since even today African political parties remain largely ethnic. Nevertheless, it is most likely the case that the banning of political parties was motivated primarily by self-interest, as the leading coalitions sought to monopolise power and maximise economic gains. The evidence from Africa does not support the idea that the post-independence leaders were interested in advancing the well-being of the general population, but instead sees them as more concerned with accumulating resources for themselves (Bratton and van de Walle, 1994). Such motives of wealth maximisation were best served when the leadership faced limited competition.

who made up their supporting coalition. In essence, cleavages based on ethnicity and religion defined the allocation of public resources, including the appointment of senior politicians. The policies that emerged from the process were more about concentrating benefits on some groups and individuals and less about promoting economic development (Brough and Kimenyi, 1986).

2.3 Military rule

From the early 1970s to the late 1980s, a large number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa were under military rule: of the 53 independent African states, approximately 40 have been affected by the 'coup d'état epidemic' (Kieh, 2000).⁵ The transition to military rule was often triggered by weaknesses in single-party rule, which was marked by a variety of failures, including poor economic performance, denial of civil freedoms, widespread corruption and failure to provide basic services such as education and health to the majority of the population. As highlighted above, many of the governments had also become increasingly discriminatory, favouring members of particular ethnic groups. All these factors generated widespread grievances, and many who opposed the regimes, including academics, faced severe repercussions, including detention and imprisonment. The discontent among the population provided militaries with the justification to overthrow civilian governments. In most cases, military coups were met with enthusiasm by the populace, who considered this method the only way to remove governments that had let them down.⁶

When the military took over government it generally ruled by decree – disbanding political parties, suspending the constitution and dissolving the legislative assembly. As a result, there were no political institutional avenues for civic input into policy-making (Anene, 1997). For example, in Uganda in 1966, Prime Minister Milton Obote suspended the constitution, assumed all government powers and removed the president and vice-president. In 1967, he put in place a new constitution which declared Uganda a republic, abolished traditional kingdoms and gave the president even greater powers. When Idi Amin ousted Obote in 1971, he too declared himself president, dissolved the parliament and amended the constitution to give himself absolute power.

2.4 Political and economic liberalisation

The 1970s and 1980s saw many African countries fall into economic recession, and an increasing role in sub-Saharan Africa for donor agencies attached to European governments (such as the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and Germany's German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), as well as international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (known collectively as the Bretton Woods Institutions)). In a context which saw the fall of the Soviet Union and the demise of socialist systems of governance, adjustment lending, debt scheduling and debt forgiveness were attached to neoliberal economic reforms, including the 'rolling-back' of the state, privatisation of state-owned companies and trade liberalisation, otherwise known as structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). With SAPs deemed a failure in the early 1990s, donor policy demands now focused on political reforms, including the establishment of democratic institutions and improving 'efficiency', transparency and accountability of bureaucracies – the latter more commonly known as the good governance agenda.

Abdulai (2009) illustrates the extent to which external actors have had an influence on domestic policy processes in Ghana. He argues that the donor-dependent nature of the Ghanaian economy provides the country's so-called development partners with significant policy leverage, and raises questions as to the extent to which Ghana can claim 'ownership' over its economic policy choices. The Economic Commission for Africa claims that the influence

⁵ There were military coups in a number of countries as recently as 2009.

⁶ A number of theories have been offered to explain the sources of military coups in Africa. These include political development theory, military centrality theory and ethnic antagonisms theory, among others. For a comprehensive discussion of these, see Kposowa and Jenkins (1993).

of the IMF and the World Bank on policies and the composition of government spending in Ghana remains very strong (Cheru, 2002).

Donor inspired, political liberalisation saw competitive politics replace single-party rule and autocratic military dictatorships in virtually all African countries. Ethnic and religious cleavages consequently became an important axis of political competition during the era of multi-party competition, for example the ethnic-based political parties that dominate politics in Ethiopia (Teshome, 2008).⁷

Liberalisation of economies in sub-Saharan Africa and their subsequent integration at regional and global levels saw more power transferred away from central governments to international institutions, regional bodies and local decentralised authorities. For example, poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), initially seen as a requirement in receiving debt relief (through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative) from the IMF and World Bank came to dominate African economic and social policies in the 1990s, while the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) became a key framework through which donor aid was disbursed and linked to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Most African countries signed up to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which in 1995 became the World Trade Organization (WTO). This rules-based system, whereby member states adhere to over 60 agreements and which covers goods, services and intellectual property, committed them to altering their national laws, regulations and administrative procedures.

African countries have a long history of attempts to integrate regionally through cooperation agreements. The South African Customs Union (SACU) and the East African Community (EAC), both established in 1910, are among the oldest of this kind. The past three decades have seen ever-increasing numbers of attempts within sub-Saharan Africa at regional economic integration and, more recently, political integration. As a result, multiple regional economic communities (RECs) have been formed. Of the 53 African countries, only 7 belong to 1 REC. However, membership to multiple RECs with overlapping mandates and functions can act as a stumbling block to regional integration. For example, tariffs ratified under the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) are often lower than those under the EAC, which can allow importers to benefit under COMESA rather than EAC rates.⁸

At continent level, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) was succeeded in 2002 by the African Union (AU), which includes in its objectives the acceleration of political and socioeconomic integration; the promotion and defence of African common positions on issues of interest to the continent and its peoples; the achievement of peace and security in Africa; and the promotion of democratic institutions, good governance and human rights.

2.5 An analysis of the political landscape

Based on this survey of the political landscape, we can identify two key dimensions that have shaped politics in the region: 1) the politics of power in the state and 2) the politics of external influence. In terms of the first, a key element of the political environment that has defined policy-making is the extent to which power is concentrated or dispersed within the polity. During military and single-party rule, decision-making powers were dominated by just a few individuals. However, with political and economic liberalisation, some power was transferred to local, regional and international spaces and actors.

With regard to the politics of external influence, during the colonial period policies were designed externally and Africans had little input. If some Africans worked for colonial administrations, this was largely in support of colonial policies. After independence, African

⁷ Ethiopian ethnic-based political parties include the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Amhara National Democratic Movement, the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement, the Somali People's Democratic Party, the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement, the Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front, the Afar National Democratic Party, the Argoba National Democratic Organisation and other minor ones.

⁸ Other important regional organisations in Africa include the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the Community of Sahel-Saharan States (CEN-SAD), among others.

countries had more scope to design their own policies. However, they remained dependent on European experts, for example those from donor organisations and international agencies such as the IMF and the World Bank, for support and policy advice and, over time, countries became increasingly dependent on foreign aid and loans. These came with conditionalities, with policy advice provided by the Bretton Woods Institutions and other donor agencies. International covenants and development paradigms were accepted and agreed on by members of the UN and the WTO which, among other things, influenced the development of domestic policy across sub-Saharan Africa. Using this analysis, we explore what impact this has had on the formation, development and decline of different actors involved in producing research for policy.

3 Think-tanks in sub-Saharan Africa

This section describes how the two political dimensions outlined above – power concentration and external influences – have shaped the emergence, development and decline of what we define as ‘think-tanks’. We describe the shifting roles of a range of actors: state-affiliated research institutes, academics, foreign experts and institutions, political parties and civil society organisations (CSOs).

3.1 Colonial- and national state-affiliated research institutes

As previously noted, it was not in the interest of the colonial administrators to give Africans a say in colonial policy. In some cases, colonial administrations set up research institutions to help them govern, such as the West African Institute for Social and Economic Research, established in 1950 in Nigeria. In East Africa, the British set up research institutions that focused on agriculture and livestock, to cater for their farming interests. Although a few Africans may have benefited from the policies emanating from these (to grow cash crops and keep grade cattle), their main purpose was ultimately to serve the interests of the colonial administration.⁹ Rathgeber (1988) observes that,

‘These [colonial] institutes took a highly focused approach, usually concentrating on agriculture and health, particularly on the needs of settler populations and on the improvement of export-oriented cash crops. For example, the British opened the botanical research station in Lagos in 1893 and by the 1930s they had established an extensive network of research stations and experimental farms throughout the country. Emphasis was on the improvement of export crops such as palm oil and palm kernels, cotton, groundnuts, rubber, cocoa, etc. After the Second World War, perhaps in recognition of the declining days of the empire, there was an increased tendency to establish regional research institutes [...] Colonial research efforts were geared towards immediate needs and especially the provision of research support to the plantation economies. Cash crop agriculture was systematically organised and colonial governments had little interest in improving the food crops grown by indigenous populations.’

During the early years of independence, former colonial research institutions were reconfigured to promote growth and development at ‘home’, while new governments invested considerable sums of money in expanding state infrastructure, including research and development (R&D). Ministries of finance, education and agriculture, among others, were given their own research and statistical units. Examples include the Planning Statistics and Research Unit of Botswana’s Ministry of Education, the Research Unit of the Zambian Ministry of Finance and Planning and the Research Unit of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning in Ghana. During military rule, state-sponsored research institutes were likely to perform only legitimising roles; otherwise, they risked harsh consequences from ruling regimes. In the 1970s and 1980s, large-scale structural adjustment across sub-Saharan Africa and the associated rolling-back of the state made financial support to research difficult to obtain from government sources. As a result, government research institutes were often scaled or shut down.

3.2 Universities and intellectuals

The educated African elite during the colonial era were largely responsible for advocating for independence and thus influenced the political ideology of the newly independent states.¹⁰

⁹ Agricultural research institutes were meant to serve the colonial settlers’ farming interests in cash crops and livestock. Only very few Africans were allowed to grow cash crops such as coffee, tea and sisal or to keep grade cattle. Thus, the fact that some research institutions were set up during the colonial era should not be mistaken as aiming to formulate policies to serve Africans.

¹⁰ See, for example, Opello (1975) and Scarritt (1971).

These intellectuals largely considered the capitalist ideology of the colonialists exploitative and unsuited to the independent African state. As such, they propagated socialist ideologies, which dominated policy-making in the early years of independence.¹¹ Intellectuals enjoyed a honeymoon period after independence when they and politicians were united in aspiring towards African nationalism and true sovereignty. During this period, Rashid (1994) argues, politicians often solicited the views of academics, whereas academics often felt honoured in contributing to national policies.

However, the honeymoon period was short-lived: as many governments moved closer to authoritarian rule, a rift emerged between politicians and academics (Mkandawire, 2000). The aforementioned positive relationship between academia and the bureaucracy gave way to strained relationships of suspicion, mistrust and antagonism and a sterile lack of cooperation. Rashid (1994) argues that,

'Many governments [...] neglected and declined to actively solicit the views and research inputs of national think tanks,¹² particularly as related to the primary areas of policy setting or policy prescriptions. 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.'

Mkandawire (2000) provides a number of explanations as to why African intellectuals played a limited role in the policy process during the post-independence era, and especially as governments became more repressive:

'The repressive politics that became the norm simply left no room for intellectuals to occupy public space. Many spaces that were open (at least theoretically) to intellectuals elsewhere were erased, infested or occupied, sometimes physically, so that neither "ivory towers" nor "Olympian detachment" nor "self-imposed" marginalization were meaningful options. In addition, most spaces over which we could exercise our autonomy were funded by outsiders who also sought to delimit our intellectual spheres. Such were the constraints that in most cases the choice was between exile, sullen self-effacement and invisibility, or sycophantic and fawning adulation of power. There were, of course, those who heroically gave themselves the option of standing up and fighting—who ended up in jail or dead. The repressive politics was further fuelled by the penchant of African leaders to assume the role of philosopher king and to reduce intellectual work to the incantation of the thought of the leader [...] In many cases most of the ideological schemes propounded by African leaders were highly idiosyncratic and often so incoherent as to be beyond the comprehension of the propagators themselves. Adhesion to them was not only difficult but also hazardous to those sycophants who diligently sought to follow the leader through infinite twists and turns as the leader sought to bridge the cavernous gap between the rhetoric of national goals and reality of predatory self-aggrandizement.'

Post-independence leaders appeared to have been interested primarily in consolidating power to extract economic gains.¹³ They did not want to encourage the development of an intellectual class as they feared this would someday oppose their rule. Furthermore, some of the freedom fighters who became government leaders in post-independence Africa were not highly

¹¹ Of course, there were also those intellectuals who advocated capitalist ideologies. President Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, for example, advocated a market economy, whereas President Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika advocated socialist planning. President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, on the other hand, propagated an ideology termed 'humanism'. The positions taken by these leaders influenced the policy direction of their countries many years after independence. See, for example, Scarritt (1971) on Zambia and the role of elite ideology in influencing policies post-independence.

¹² Most of these included university-based research centres and the few independent think-tanks in existence then.

¹³ See, for example, Bratton and van de Walle (1994)'s discussion of neo-patrimonial regimes in Africa.

educated and, as a consequence, they did not appreciate intellectual capital; any criticism of policy was taken as a challenge to their rule. As Mkandawire (2000) suggests above, given their underutilisation in the public sector, African intellectuals therefore turned to civil society, providing mostly foreign-funded research institutes (NGOs) with research (albeit with limited intellectual independence). These in turn often used this as a basis for advice to governments. So, ironically, African governments would on occasion access the research of their own intellectuals indirectly through donor-contracted reports.¹⁴

During military rule, policy decisions were made singularly by the military leader and military councils, which usually shared the same policy ideology. University research centres faced severe constraints in undertaking independent research. Worse still, funding to many universities and their research centres was curtailed, leaving tertiary education systems in ruin.¹⁵ Additionally, many local experts left their country or became inactive, leading to a significant 'brain drain' and arguably reducing the quality of policy-making for future generations.

Consequently, universities became increasingly reliant on external support-from (often US) foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller and agencies such as Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Swedish Agency for International Development Cooperation (Sida) and the World Bank. This had important implications for who undertook research, the types of research questions asked, the way questions were framed and the extent to which research was linked with government policy. During economic and political liberalisation in the 1980s and 1990s, university professors often returned to the policy fold by setting up their own (donor-funded) research centres. Examples include the Development Policy Centre in Nigeria, the Economic and Social Research Foundation in Tanzania and the Centre for Policy Studies in South Africa.

3.3 Foreign experts

During the early (as well as later) years of independence, African governments relied heavily on foreign mentors and experts for intellectual inspiration or affirmation. For example, Tanzania's Julius Nyerere had a band of foreign 'Fabian socialists' who could access him easily, in sharp contrast with Tanzanians themselves, who encountered difficulties meeting Nyerere in person. In Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda enlisted John Hatch as a close intellectual associate, inviting him to be the first director of the Institute for Humanism. And Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah surrounded himself with pan-Africanists, such as George Padmore and W.E.B. Dubois. Later, European and American 'radicals' were to appear as peripatetic advisors to a number of regimes in Africa (Mkandawire, 2000).

During the 1970s and 1980s, most sub-Saharan economies fell into recession, and governments subsequently requested support from foreign donors and international agencies. In exchange for this support, donors demanded a substantial role in decision-making. In the late 1980s, for instance, there were over 100,000 donor-funded expatriate advisors working in the public sectors of 40 sub-Saharan African countries, at a cost of more than \$4 billion, nearly 35% of official development assistance to the region (World Bank, 1989). The same donors who sought to establish 'local experts' would tie their aid to the employment of their own experts, thus further marginalising local experts and academics. Van de Walle (1999) notes that, in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, policy-making and policy analysis were increasingly undertaken by donor agencies and international institutions:

'For the last decade a small number of technocrats, typically based in the presidency and central bank, in collaboration with officials from international

¹⁴ This is still true today, as many African researchers serve as consultants for foreign organisations and governments while they are unlikely to be awarded such consultancies by their own governments directly.

¹⁵ An illustrative case study comes from what happened to one of the leading institutions in Africa – Uganda's Makerere University – during Amin's rule. Makerere was well known for producing some of the best intellectuals in Africa, who then served in advising governments. However, by the end of Amin's rule, Makerere was intellectually mutilated, as the best researchers left for other countries and others disappeared under mysterious circumstances.

financial institutions, has made economic policy. The donor staff in Washington has largely designed and prepared reform programs; perhaps no more than a handful of local officials actually reads and debates the documents before governments sign off on them. National debate on economic policy issues has been in some cases actively discouraged.'

3.4 Civil society organisations

Political and economic liberalisation in the 1970s and 1980s had considerable effects on the think-tank landscape in sub-Saharan Africa:

- The number of new non-government 'think tanks' (including so-called 'briefcase think-tanks') proliferated in response to increased donor funding and a perception that space for civil society had expanded;
- Think-tanks initially prioritised policy issues related to political and economic liberalisation, such as trade liberalisation, regional integration and the 'good governance' agenda, and then poverty reduction and achievement of the MDGs. For example, the Free Market Foundation of South Africa undertook research on how South Africa should negotiate the Doha Round.
- Many of these think-tanks received funding from the same donors that were lending to African governments with neoliberal conditionalities. Think-tanks were often provided with funding to monitor and help improve government policy implementation, thus legitimising donor positions and providing a mechanism for donors to hold recipient governments accountable. For example, the World Bank's African Capacity Building Foundation played a key role in establishing think-tanks in Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda, which were unlikely to stray from the agenda of their primary funders.
- Think-tanks had to consider how their research findings interacted with overlapping and sometimes contradicting regional and international agreements and treaties.
- African think-tanks were often competing for government influence with international institutions such as the World Bank and their research units.
- Finally, since power appeared as more diffuse, think-tanks started targeting multiple audiences, not only the executive but also legislators, representatives of regional and international organisations and politicians at sub-national level.

Despite multi-party politics having swept across much of sub-Saharan Africa, few parties appeared to draw on research products to improve their function as a policy platform. Juma and DiSenso (2006) argue that African political parties have little intellectual support and thus lack the capacity to instigate serious debate and analysis of future scenarios:

'Party platforms are essentially documents in which political parties enumerate their goals and principles in ways that go beyond rhetorical exhortations. They are the result of thoughtful discussion and compromise, and attempt to reflect the core values and commitments of the party. Creating effective party platforms will, therefore, require considerable intellectual input, which can be provided through think-tanks and other research institutions. Most African political parties have little intellectual support.

'Instead, their manifestos are largely a long list of wishful thinking that is not guided by serious debate and analysis of the future. It is through such intellectual dialogue that countries can start to map out visions for their future. This process will not only offer voters the opportunity to express their views, but it will also replace routine squabbling with reasoned debate and dialogue.'

Civil society research organisations are reluctant to work too closely with political parties for fear of being seen as partisan and having their research discredited. With many democracies across Africa still fledgling, opposition parties tend to be weak. As such research CSOs are more likely to work with the executive.

4 Conclusion

We set out to explore how the political context in sub-Saharan Africa has informed the origin, development and/or decline of think-tanks, that is, the individuals and organisations that produce research with the intention of informing policy debates, formally or informally. By surveying key political trends over the past five decades, we uncovered two key factors shaping the context and its evolution: 1) the concentration of power across nation states and 2) the role of external influences. We then explored how these factors affected the trajectory of four different types of think-tank.

To sum up, during the colonial era, when African elites had little say in policy, the French and British often set up research institutes to help them govern, improve the lives of settler populations and expand the growth of export-oriented cash crops. Immediately after independence, African politicians often sought the advice of academics, who played a key role in advancing mainly socialist ideas, which dominated policy-making. This saw newly independent states reorient colonial (research) institutions to promote national development and invest significant amounts in R&D, both in government and in universities. Governments nevertheless still relied heavily on foreign experts and intellectuals for inspiration.

What political competition there was, dried up shortly after independence, as leaders aimed to consolidate power and to contain tribal and ethnic tension. Under single-party rule, 'big man' politics dominated. Fearful of being opposed, politicians treated academics with suspicion and mistrust. Political space for academics soon disappeared. And the few spaces in which academics could exercise their autonomy were funded by outsiders, who placed limits on their intellectual independence. Widespread discontent led the military in many African countries to overthrow civilian governments. Military rule was equally authoritarian: the army generally ruled by decree, with little space for civic input into policy-making. Little or no priority was given to the production of policy ideas and research. Funding for tertiary education and state- and university-affiliated research institutes was cut massively. Those who stood up to military regimes were persecuted. Academics went into exile (creating a brain drain), made themselves inconspicuous or 'toed the line'.

Structural adjustment in line with Western-inspired policies in the 1980s and 1990s saw large cuts in public spending and a further scaling-back of research capacity. Many of government's functions, including research, were transferred to non-state actors. This saw the proliferation of foreign-funded US-style independent think-tanks, which to some extent legitimised the mainstream policy agenda at the time. University research centres looked to institutional donors and foundations to plug their resource gap. Professors on occasion set up their own (foreign-funded) research organisations. Meanwhile, donors often tied their aid to the provision of their own experts, resulting in a huge number of foreign advisors and consultants working in African policy-making institutions.

This study, being merely exploratory, leaves many questions unanswered and hence plenty of scope for further research. For instance, how has the political context informed the agendas of various think-tanks over time? And, given that politics in Africa has been organised along racial, ethnic and/or religious cleavages (see Kimenyi, 1997) what has been the impact of population fractionalisation on the production of research? Exploring this in places like Nigeria, Rwanda and Sudan, where there have been tensions based on clan, ethnicity and religion, would be particularly interesting.

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