

ENHANCING THE POLICY IMPACT OF THINK TANKS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, [think tanks have emerged](#) as increasingly influential actors within Central Africa's policy landscape, responding to growing demand for independent, evidence-based analysis on complex governance and development challenges. These institutions have expanded their contributions across diverse sectors, including democratic governance, peace and security, economic policy, regional integration, climate resilience, and public health, providing research, policy analysis, and technical expertise to governments and regional organizations. Their growth has been supported by increased investment from international development partners, foundations, and multilateral organizations seeking to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking and institutional capacity across the region. Despite this progress, the integration of research evidence into public policy remains inconsistent. This policy brief argues that the main challenge

facing Central African think tanks is not the production of research itself, but the absence of institutional mechanisms that systematically connect research evidence to public decision-making processes. In many Central African countries, policymaking continues to be driven by political priorities, administrative traditions, and short-term imperatives, with limited institutional mechanisms for systematically incorporating research findings into policy design, implementation, and evaluation. This policy brief therefore aims to diagnose the context of Central African think tanks, analyzes the barriers limiting their policy influence, and proposes practical strategies for strengthening government engagement and evidence-based policymaking.

Key Messages

- Central Africa does not primarily need more research; it needs stronger systems and institutions for using the research already being produced.

- Policy influence depends on timing, relevance, and sustained engagement, not research quality alone.
- Governments, think tanks and development partners must build a more institutionalized and sustainable evidence ecosystem.

Introduction

I. Context of Think Tanks in Central African

Think tanks have become increasingly important in Central Africa, providing research and policy analysis on governance, peace and security, economic development, regional integration, climate change and public health. However, as the brief notes, the availability of research has not translated consistently into policy influence. Government–think tank engagement remains largely informal and project-based, with limited institutional mechanisms for integrating research into policy design, implementation and evaluation. The experience of other countries provides useful lessons for



strengthening this relationship. Through the [Parliamentary Research Services](#), Kenya has institutionalized engagement between research institutions and Parliament through parliamentary research services and mechanisms that facilitate evidence use in legislation and oversight. Largely driven by the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MINECOFIN) and the [National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda \(NISR\)](#), Rwanda has integrated evidence into national planning, monitoring and evaluation, creating stronger links between research and government decision-making. South Africa through the [Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation \(DPME\)](#) and [SA-TIED](#) with the National Treasury, demonstrates the value of sustained government–research partnerships in which policymakers and researchers jointly identify policy questions and produce evidence. These experiences suggest that Central Africa does not necessarily need more research alone; it needs stronger institutional bridges between research producers and policy decision-makers. Think tanks ought to therefore increase their impact by engaging more systematically with ministries, parliaments and planning institutions, while governments can establish formal mechanisms for commissioning, accessing and applying independent research. The priority should therefore be to move from ad hoc, project-based engagement towards an institutionalized evidence-informed policy ecosystem. Despite the growing presence and increasing sophistication of think tanks in Central Africa, evidence-

informed policymaking remains limited. The experience of countries that have successfully institutionalized research-policy engagement demonstrates that strong analytical capacity alone is insufficient. The key challenge lies in the mechanisms through which evidence reaches and influences decision-makers.

II. The Policy Challenge: Why Research Rarely Shapes Policy

Despite the growing number of think tanks and policy research institutions in Central Africa, research continues to have limited influence on public policy. Policymaking is often shaped by political priorities, institutional traditions, immediate crises and resource constraints, while research engagement with government remains largely informal and project-based.

First, there is limited institutional demand for independent research. Many government institutions do not have formal systems for identifying evidence gaps, commissioning independent studies or systematically reviewing research before major policies and programmes are adopted. As a result, engagement with think tanks may depend heavily on individual officials or political champions rather than established institutional processes.

Second, research is not always produced in forms that policymakers can readily use. Academic and policy research may be technically rigorous but too lengthy, complex or disconnected from immediate policy decisions. Policymakers often require concise analysis that

clearly identifies the problem, policy options, costs, risks and practical recommendations. When research does not respond to these needs or policy timelines, its likelihood of uptake is reduced.

Third, timing and political incentives matter. Governments frequently operate under pressure to respond quickly to political, economic or security challenges. Research, by contrast, often requires time for data collection, analysis and validation. Evidence that becomes available after a policy decision has already been made may have little influence, regardless of its quality. Political considerations can also outweigh technically sound recommendations where reforms carry short-term political costs.

Fourth, weak access to government data limits both the quality and relevance of research. Think tanks often face difficulties obtaining reliable, timely and sufficiently disaggregated public data. This constrains their ability to undertake rigorous analysis and evaluate government programmes. Limited data-sharing also reduces opportunities for researchers and public institutions to jointly develop evidence.

Fifth, financing constraints affect the independence and continuity of think tanks. Many institutions depend significantly on donor-funded projects, which can encourage short research cycles and make research agendas responsive to external funding priorities. This can limit sustained engagement with national policy institutions and make

it difficult for think tanks to maintain long-term research programmes around emerging government priorities.

Sixth, weak research-to-policy communication reduces uptake. Producing a policy brief or organizing a policy dialogue does not guarantee that evidence will influence a decision. Think tanks need sustained engagement with policymakers before, during and after research production. This requires policy communication, stakeholder mapping, targeted briefings and continuous follow-up rather than one-off dissemination activities.

Finally, there are limited mechanisms for measuring policy influence. Think tanks may track publications, events, media visibility and participation, but these indicators do not necessarily demonstrate whether research influenced legislation, government programmes, budgets or institutional reforms. Without stronger systems for tracking policy uptake, both governments and research institutions have limited ability to identify which forms of engagement actually generate policy impact.

The central challenge, therefore, is a disconnect between the supply of evidence and the demand and capacity to use it. Central African countries require stronger institutional mechanisms that bring researchers and policymakers together throughout the policy cycle from identifying problems and generating evidence to designing, implementing and evaluating policies. Without such mechanisms, valuable research risks remaining in reports, conferences and

academic publications rather than becoming part of government decisions.

III. Why Stronger Engagement Matters

Given the barriers that limit the uptake of evidence in policymaking, stronger engagement between think tanks and governments is essential to ensuring that public policies are informed by credible evidence and responsive to the complex challenges facing Central Africa. Several reasons further account as to why stronger engagement matters.

Stronger engagement can improve the quality of public policy. Regular interaction between policymakers and research institutions allows governments to access independent analysis, alternative policy options and evidence on what works. This can help reduce decisions based primarily on assumptions, political expediency or limited information.

Engagement can strengthen government capacity. Think tanks can complement the analytical capacity of public institutions by providing specialized expertise, data analysis, policy evaluation and technical knowledge. This is particularly important where ministries and public agencies have limited research and analytical resources.

In addition, stronger engagement can improve policy relevance. When policymakers are involved in identifying research questions, researchers are better positioned to address actual policy problems and produce findings that respond to government priorities.

Continuous engagement also allows evidence to reach decision-makers at the right time, particularly during policy formulation and budget cycles.

Furthermore, stronger research–government relationships can enhance accountability. Independent research can provide governments, parliaments and citizens with evidence on whether public policies and programmes are achieving their intended results. Think tanks can therefore contribute to monitoring implementation, evaluating public spending and identifying gaps between policy commitments and outcomes.

Finally, stronger engagement can make think tank research more sustainable and impactful. Long-term institutional partnerships allow research institutions to develop expertise around national priorities while providing governments with reliable access to independent policy analysis.

Stronger engagement should not compromise the independence of think tanks. Rather, it should create institutional channels through which policymakers can access credible evidence and through which research can more effectively inform public decisions.

Conclusion and policy pathways for Stronger Government Engagement

Central Africa has a growing community of think tanks and policy research institutions producing evidence on some of the region's most pressing governance, security and development

challenges. Yet, as this policy brief has demonstrated, the availability of research does not automatically translate into policy influence. The central challenge is the weak institutional connection between those who produce evidence and those responsible for making and implementing public policy. The experiences examined in this brief demonstrate that stronger policy impact requires a shift from research dissemination to institutionalized evidence use. Kenya's parliamentary research mechanisms, Rwanda's integration of evidence into planning, South Africa's government–research partnerships all demonstrate different ways of creating stronger connections between knowledge and decision-making. These models should not be replicated mechanically in Central Africa, but they offer practical principles that can be adapted to national institutional realities.

The challenge is therefore less a deficit of knowledge than a deficit of institutionalized evidence use. Strengthening the relationship between research and policymaking should become a governance reform priority across Central Africa.

Policy Pathways

1. Institutionalize government–think tank engagement.

Government Agencies and Parliaments should establish formal mechanisms for regular interaction with think tanks and research institutions, including

policy advisory committees, research liaison units, thematic working groups and structured policy dialogues. Such mechanisms would reduce reliance on informal relationships and help institutionalize the use of independent evidence in policymaking processes.

2. Strengthen evidence translation and policy communication.

Think tanks should invest in converting research into concise, accessible and decision-oriented products, including policy briefs, evidence summaries, executive notes and targeted briefings. Research communication should be tailored to specific audiences and aligned with policy and budget cycles so that evidence reaches decision-makers when it can still influence decisions.

3. Improve access to data and promote co-produced policy research.

Ministries and think tanks should improve access to public data and move beyond one-off commissioned studies towards longer-term research partnerships. Jointly identifying research questions, sharing non-sensitive data and engaging throughout the research process can increase the relevance, credibility and practical application of findings.

4. Establish stronger monitoring and evaluation of policy influence.

Think tanks should move beyond counting publications, events and media appearances to tracking whether research contributes to changes in legislation,

government programmes, budgets, strategies or institutional practices. Developing common indicators for policy uptake would help organizations identify which engagement approaches generate the greatest impact.

5. Create more sustainable financing for policy research.

Development partners, governments and foundations should support longer-term and flexible funding models that allow think tanks to maintain institutional expertise and respond to emerging national priorities. Sustainable financing would reduce excessive dependence on short project cycles and enable research institutions to build lasting policy partnerships. Regional funding mechanisms and collaborative research platforms can further support sustainability while encouraging knowledge production on shared governance challenges across Central Africa.



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