DO INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS TRULY ENHANCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AFRICAN THINK TANKS?

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Executive Summary

Long rooted in Western democratic culture, the concept of think tanks has spread, particularly across the African continent. While the very first African think tank was established in 1934 in South Africa under the name South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), it was not until 1973 that the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) was created, and not until the 1980s before African intellectuals began establishing numerous such organizations. However, it is clear that after nearly half a century, many African think tanks remain fragile and heavily dependent on resources from international partnerships. It is therefore important to ask why some partnerships genuinely strengthen the capacities of think tanks while others perpetuate their dependence.

Despite this challenging context, the international partnerships of think tanks on the continent can take many forms due to their impact on their operations. Indeed, we can identify opportunistic, strategic, and collaborative partnerships. These partnerships exist within both North-South and South-South relationships. In this context, we find technical donors such as the World Bank; international organizations such as the European Union or the African Union; development agencies from developed countries such as the French Development Agency (AFD); nongovernmental organizations; and multinational corporations.

Beyond their diversity, this analysis shows that international partnerships towards African think tanks contribute to strengthening their capacities: the capacity to carry out ambitious projects, to enhance their expertise on complex issues, and to secure sustainable funding. However, these international partnerships can benefit African think tanks even more if they align partners' agendas with local priorities, adapt their analytical methodologies to local realities, and if partners provide structural and sustainable funding.

Key points

- International partnerships remain the primary source of funding and capacity building for African think tanks.
- While some partnerships have enabled the sustainable strengthening of the capacities of African think tanks, many do not yet contribute to their institutional autonomy.
- The international partnerships of African think tanks cannot have the same impact, because they are sometimes opportunistic, sometimes strategic and even collaborative, each modality having a distinct impact on the level of autonomy of the African partner.
- Although beneficial in terms of capacity building, resources and methodological tools, there is a risk that international partnerships will lead to an intellectual dependence on modes of reasoning specific to Western societies and unsuitable for the African context.
- It seems urgent to promote alternative sources of funding to reduce the financial dependence of think tanks, which will certainly help to strengthen their institutional autonomy.

Introduction

First emerging in Western democracies, think tanks have gradually spread throughout the world, including in diverse political contexts. Today, they are recognized as key players in knowledge production, public policy analysis, and governance improvement.

African countries are not on the sidelines of this global movement. To capitalize on the opportunities offered by think tanks, several African countries have opened their political and institutional spaces to organizations established on other continents and have gradually fostered the emergence of national initiatives. However, these countries have also facilitated the emergence of national think tanks established by their own citizens. These organizations focus their activities on four main pillars: economic policy, democratic governance, peace and conflict prevention, and sustainable development. According to the 2020 *Global Go To Think Tank Index report*, sub-Saharan Africa has nearly 700 think tanks.

Indeed, think tanks have proliferated exponentially in Africa. Analysis reveals that many African think tanks are created in the wake of other foreign organizations, either to act as their representatives on the continent or to solicit collaboration. In 2007, the African Development Bank (AfDB) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) presented globalization as an opportunity that Africa should not miss. Given the vulnerabilities linked to its development model and its extreme dependence on the global economy, Africa should develop a genuine strategy for mobilizing external resources to achieve its emergence.

In this context, African think tanks rely heavily on international partnerships to fund their activities, enhance their capacities, and increase their influence. However, this reliance proves problematic, as even the slightest crisis affects their operational effectiveness. This dependence remains problematic because it exposes African organizations to shifting priorities among

international donors. The recent cutbacks of certain development aid programs illustrate the risks associated with excessive dependance on external funding. For think tanks, such developments can affect program continuity, financial stability, and the ability to set long-term research priorities.

In this context, to what extent do international partnerships actually enhance the effectiveness of African think tanks? While acknowledging the scope and contribution of international partnerships to the effectiveness of sub-Saharan African think tanks, it is also important to highlight their limitations.

I - Diversified international partnerships

The international partnerships of African think tanks can be grouped into three main categories.

— Opportunistic partnerships. This opportunism is reflected in the partnership negotiation methods, which are essentially based on a request for funding to carry out a project, a mission, or a component of an activity. The partnership lasts only for the duration of the project; it may be renewed. In West Africa, for example, WATHI collaborates with international foundations to promote citizen participation in development policies in the Sahel region. Through its website, this think tank indicates that, in partnership with the Canadian Embassy in Senegal, it seized the opportunity presented by the February 2019 Senegalese presidential election to give women a voice so they could express their specific expectations of government leaders. In this regard, African think tanks appear more as implementing bodies than as actors fully involved in defining strategic directions. They report on the activities carried out while submitting entirely to the latter's guidelines, but cannot acquire experience in project management or gain visibility.

— Strategic partnerships. The strategic nature of these partnerships lies in their aim to strengthen the operational capacities of think tanks, as well as their ability to make proposals. They rely on substantial grants, which can finance a sufficiently diverse range of projects. This is at least the model established by the World Bank, whose priority is to strengthen and deepen operational relationships and partnerships with institutions in the Global South, such as the African Centers of Excellence and the Africa Think Tank Platform. The African Union is a stakeholder in the Africa Think Tank Platform and, through it, aims to position African research centers as pillars of governance, development, and regional integration. Consequently, African think tanks become less dependent on the oversight of their partners and strengthen their capacities in project design and implementation. This freedom allows them to select the priority programs and issues of local societies, even though they must still obtain the approval of international partners.

— Collaborative partnerships. These are partnerships through which think tanks undertake joint projects in a spirit of sharing experiences and resources. This collaboration aims to create synergy among think tanks that share similar issues and challenges. It appears that, despite their great diversity, African think tanks face common challenges. In order to share their experiences and improve their action strategies, these organizations are increasing the number of forums such as the Africa Think Tank Summit organized by the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), the African Think Tanks Strategic Dialogue organized by the Royal

Institute for Strategic Studies (IRES), and the Central African Think Tanks Forum organized by the Nkafu Policy Institute. This partnership also takes the form of collaborative projects, such as the SCATT-BRIDGE Project, launched by the Nkafu Policy Institute in July 2024 for think tanks in Central Africa. This type of partnership is geared towards sharing experience, solidarity, and building a strong network to influence the development and implementation of public policies. However, African think tanks have limited resources to expand these collaborative partnerships.

In addition to their great diversity, international partnerships strengthen the operational effectiveness of think tanks in Africa.

II - International partnerships promote the operational efficiency of think tanks

International partnerships can effectively impact the functioning of think tanks in Africa. This contribution can be analyzed along three dimensions.

— Strengthening the expertise of think tanks in Africa. In this regard, the participation of African think tanks in projects led by organizations from developed countries facilitates the transfer of knowledge related to their areas of focus. This expertise is often cutting-edge, as these organizations come from societies that are more advanced in issues of economic governance, environmental protection, and the evaluation of democratic processes. By making collaboration conditional on the adoption of a specific methodology and by conducting a rigorous evaluation of results, partners of African think tanks deepen their understanding of these issues. However, African think tanks run the risk of intellectual dependence if they do not adapt their partners' analytical models to the local context. For example, all think tanks that collaborate with human rights organizations are required to integrate a gender perspective into their activities. However, the implementation of this requirement should be based on the level of involvement of both genders in social activities.

— Strengthening the operational capacities of African think tanks. With the support of their partners, think tanks across the continent benefit from expanded working capacities, both geographically and intellectually. At the geographical level, some think tanks successfully implement their projects in several countries through local partnerships. The Nkafu Policy Institute's SCATT-BRIDGE project is a prime example of this type of benefits linked to international partnerships, in a context where deploying this organization using its own human resources would have been an insurmountable obstacle. The same is true of the peacebuilding and transitional justice project led by the Institute for Democratic Governance. At the intellectual level, the diversification of partnerships allows some think tanks to have a broad scope of analysis. This is the case with Thinking Africa, or Africa of Ideas, think tanks that produces multidisciplinary knowledge on public policy in Africa.

— Strengthening the financial and logistical capacities of African think tanks. Clearly, one of the obstacles to the growth of independent think tanks in Africa lies in the scarcity of funding. Elsewhere, in the United States for example, private companies and foundations are the primary donors of think tanks. This demonstrates a culture of private-sector participation in the management of public affairs through constructive criticism and recommendations for improvement. The scenario is different in Africa, where the

analysis of public policies by independent private-sector organizations has yet to win over capital holders. In this context, international partnerships are the primary source of funding for African think tanks. In this regard, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), through its Think Tank Initiative, indicates that it has helped more than 40 think tanks in 20 countries to invest in long-term planning, establish research priorities, strengthen their capacity to interact with the policy sphere and conduct research tailored to the needs and prospects of their country.

Upon closer examination, the rise of think tanks in Africa appears to be a fragile dynamic, primarily dependent on international partnerships. However, these partnerships do not fully meet expectations.

III - International partnerships that could be improved

As things stand now, the international partnerships of African think tanks need adjustment in certain aspects. The aim is to establish partnerships that sustainably improve these organizations, guaranteeing their long-term operational autonomy. While not exhaustive, three sets of challenges must be addressed by these think tanks and their partners.

— Align donors' agendas with priority issues in the contexts where African think tanks operate. Given the pervasive poverty, it would be wiser to prioritize public policy analysis on issues such as economic development, natural resource governance, and the fight against corruption. Funding priorities would benefit from being more closely aligned with locally identified needs, while maintaining a balance between economic, social, environmental, and governance issues. However, most funding is directed toward priorities that are sometimes out of step with the needs of local communities. Partnerships will be all the more effective the more they respond to locally identified priorities.

— Develop methodologies that facilitate the adoption of foreign aid and expertise. Analyzing the problems of African societies through the lens of Western standards is not always easy. This difficulty has notably fueled debates surrounding the Alternative Report on Africa (ARSA), an initiative led by several African think tanks aiming to propose analytical frameworks and indicators better suited to the realities of the continent. While its proponents emphasize a more contextualized understanding of African issues, some observers criticize it for not giving sufficient weight to security concerns and the heterogeneity of African contexts.This controversy illustrates the difficulty of developing analytical tools that are both grounded in local realities and capable of capturing the full diversity of the continent. As long as local specificities are not sufficiently taken into account, social phenomena risk being misinterpreted and the results biased. For example, gender analysis in African social contexts cannot be done without taking cultural and religious factors into account, particularly in the data collection and interpretation.

— Reduce the volatility or instability of financial support that jeopardizes the long-term budgetary viability of think tank operations in Africa. Moreover, the prevailing opinion now supports the essential need to invest in institutional capacity building, the co-creation of knowledge, the strengthening of ecosystems, and conditions that promote the effective use of evidence.

From the above, there emerges a pressing need to reduce the financial

dependence of think tanks in order to strengthen their operational autonomy.

IV – From financial dependence to institutional autonomy

Despite their usefulness, international partnerships cannot be the sole basis for the viability of African think tanks. The volatility of international aid, shifting donor priorities, and the evolving geopolitical context demonstrate the need to gradually build more autonomous models. This autonomy does not mean breaking ties with international partners, but rather diversifying funding sources and strengthening institutional capacities.

Several avenues are worth exploring: the development of consulting services, the engagement of the African private sector, the contribution of African philanthropic foundations, partnerships with public and private universities, and the creation of national or regional funds to support research and public expertise. The challenge is to build institutions capable of defining their own research priorities while maintaining their scientific credibility and intellectual independence.

In the long term, the true measure of the success of international partnerships will not lie solely in the funding mobilized, but in their ability to enable African think tanks to gradually acquire the resources, skills and legitimacy necessary for their autonomy.

V. Strategic recommendations

In order to transform international partnerships in true levers of institutional autonomy, several measures should to be prioritized.

- **First,** African think tanks should diversify their funding sources to reduce their dependence on international donors. This involves, in particular, developing consulting services, strengthening partnerships with the African private sector, and mobilizing national and regional philanthropic foundations.
- **Second**, technical and financial partners should increase flexible institutional funding rather than focusing exclusively on funding tied to specific projects. Sustainable organizational capacity-building is an essential prerequisite for think tanks' autonomy.
- **Third,** African think tanks and their partners would benefit from further promoting South-South partnerships and peer-learning mechanisms. These collaborations enable the sharing of experiences tailored to the continent's realities while limiting the risks of intellectual dependence.
- **Fourth,** research programs supported by international partners should be more closely aligned with locally identified priorities. Greater consideration of national and regional needs would enhance the relevance and impact of the work produced.
- **Finally,** African think tanks should invest in developing analytical methodologies adapted to local contexts in order to better reconcile international standards with local realities.

Conclusion

International partnerships have played a decisive role in the growth of think tanks in sub-Saharan Africa. They have helped strengthen these organizations' research, advocacy, and funding capacities, while also fostering their integration into major international debates. However, their growing importance has also created new forms of dependence that can undermine their institutional autonomy and influence their research priorities.

The challenge for African think tanks is therefore not to replace international partnerships, but to integrate them into a broader strategy of sustainable strengthening. This requires diversifying funding sources, better aligning donor priorities with local needs, and increasing investment in developing their own capacities. Ultimately, the true measure of the success of these partnerships will lie not only in the resources mobilized, but in their ability to enable African think tanks to become more autonomous, influential, and sustainable actors in shaping the continent's public policies.

To conclude, the question is not whether African think tanks should work with international partners, but how to transform these partnerships into sustainable levers for institutional autonomy and influence over public policy.



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