RESILIENT DEMOCRACY INFRASTRUCTURE IN AFRICA: STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE THINK TANKS AMIDST RISING AUTHORITARIANISM

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Executive Summary

Democratic space in Africa is shrinking: 44 of 50 Sub-Saharan countries have obstructed, repressed, or closed civic space. Governance think tanks matter in this setting because they supply evidence for policy, link citizens to government, and uphold accountability. They face political pressure, polarisation, donor dependence, and internal weaknesses. Many are building resilience by diversifying funding, forming regional networks, strengthening communications and adopting AI carefully. The paper recommends legal protection for civic freedoms, regional think-tank networks, sustainable funding models that preserve independence, stronger digital and physical security, and inclusive leadership. While this policy brief examines trends affecting governance think tanks across Africa, particular attention is paid to Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Africa, where shrinking civic space, governance challenges and democratic pressures have become especially pronounced. The experiences discussed offer lessons that are broadly relevant across the continent while recognizing the specific realities facing think tanks operating in Central Africa.

Key Messages

- Civic space is under pressure: Democratic regression across Africa, including censorship, internet shutdowns, harassment of researchers, and coups, restricts the environment governance think tanks depend on, especially in Central Africa.
- Think tanks play four roles: They inform evidence-based policy, link citizens and government, reinforce democratic norms and accountability, and foster policy innovation.
- Threats are external and internal: Shrinking civic space, polarisation and donor dependence combine with weak governance, poor succession planning and staff turnover.

- Resilience requires action on several fronts: Think tanks should diversify funding, build regional networks, communicate strategically, use AI responsibly, strengthen security practices and include women, youth and marginalised groups.

The challenge: democracy under pressure

As indicated by the CIVICUS Monitor, 44 of the 50 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are categorized into obstructed, repressed, and closed civic space categories. More than 80 percent of the region's population is in a situation where civic freedoms are highly restricted. The issue becomes even more worrying in Central Africa, given that the political transition in the region remains weak and civic actors face various regulatory and political hurdles. CIVICUS states that censorship, protest restrictions, arrests of journalists, and exclusion of civil society organizations from political processes are common in the region. Such trends have far-reaching effects on governance think tanks that rely on information, research, stakeholder interaction, and discussion.

Africa's democratic trajectory has become increasingly uneven over the past decade. While some countries have witnessed peaceful political transitions and institutional reforms, others have experienced democratic regression, characterized by restrictions on civil society organisations, internet shutdowns and high levels of censorship, harassment of researchers and journalists, restrictions on freedom of public assembly, military coups and unconstitutional changes of government, amongst other challenges.

Why Governance Think Tanks Matter

The role of governance think tanks in linking research to public policy and citizens cannot be overstated. They play an especially important role in African countries where the effectiveness of democratic governance may be hampered by a lack of accountability, a lack of credible policy knowledge and information, institutional weaknesses, and a lack of citizen participation. Governance think tanks may be able to fill these gaps by conducting independent research, formulating policy options, and providing avenues through which governments, civil society, the private sector, and citizens may deliberate issues of public concern. In most Sub-Saharan countries, where governance is plagued by political instability, insecurity, institutional weakness, economic scarcity, and shrinking civic space, the role of governance think tanks is crucial.

Think tanks are engaged in contributing to evidence-based policymaking. There are always many policy decisions to make for governments. Politics is the basis on which these decisions are made. Research can provide policymakers with facts, experience, and alternatives. Policy analysis, legislative review, public expenditure analysis, governance assessment and impact assessment by think tanks can assist the decision-makers in understanding the implications of the various policies.

Also, governance think tanks can act as intermediaries between the citizens and the government. Such an institution can translate the complex policy issues into understandable information and can give opportunities for citizens to take part in public discussions. Public dialogue, policy forums, media engagement, and community consultation are some of the activities that can help think tanks increase the number of participants in the process of policymaking. Such intermediation is particularly essential when the institutional means for the involvement of the citizens are lacking.

Furthermore, democratic norms and accountability can be reinforced via think tank research. Independent policy research can be used to discover deficiencies within existing institutions, monitor policies, evaluate government performance, and provide information that allows citizens and other agents of accountability to push for improved governance. This is especially vital at a time of increasing democratic backsliding. The 2026 Democracy Report and dataset released by V-Dem provide evidence of ongoing democratic decline worldwide, highlighting the necessity for institutions and actors who can respond to this situation.

As opposed to political institutions that operate under electoral cycles, think tanks can study structural problems over longer periods of time and formulate policy recommendations that do not necessarily bring any immediate political gains. Think tanks emulate new approaches, learn from experiences of other countries and regions, and anticipate future challenges. In Africa, this is especially relevant when dealing with issues of decentralization, natural resource management, conflict resolution, regional integration, digital governance, youth unemployment, and democracy resilience.

Emerging Threats Facing Governance Think Tanks

Even with their critical role, governance think tanks find themselves operating in an ecosystem faced with enormous challenges that include political, financial, technological, and institutional challenges. The most significant pressure is the shrinking of civic and democratic space. Evidence suggests that, in Sub-Saharan Africa, governments have been implementing more regulations on freedoms such as association, expression, assembly, and access to information. In a report issued by On Think Tanks, 43 out of 50 Sub-Saharan African countries were found to be obstructing, repressing, and closing civic space.

Also, political polarisation and politicisation of evidence. In today's world, it has become commonplace to conduct research under circumstances whereby policy discourse is prone to partisan interpretation. Evidence that goes against government policies is easily rejected as politically biased, and when evidence seems to support government policies, questions are raised regarding independence from the government. According to the 2025 On

Think Tanks State of the Sector Report, 36% of think tanks surveyed stated that political polarisation was among the major challenges facing them, compared to 24% in 2024.

Problem of sustainability. Many of the African think tanks are still very reliant on donor-financed projects that are limited both temporally and extensively. While foreign funding has played an instrumental role in conducting research, reliance on funding from projects may erode organizational independence and make it very hard for the think tanks to keep permanent staff and establish systems.

In addition to these external threats, there are internal vulnerabilities in think tanks, including poor governance, lack of proper succession planning, limited fundraising skills, staff turnover, and communication challenges. Such vulnerabilities become particularly threatening when organizations operate in an environment of political pressure. Resilience needs to address both these threats and the internal vulnerabilities of think tanks.

How Think Tanks are Building Resilience

Governance think tanks have responded to these pressures by adopting various emerging institutional and strategic resilience measures. The first form of resilience is the diversification of funding and revenue generation. Many institutions have tried combining grants, commissioned research, consultancy, training, membership, private sector, and domestic philanthropy.

Another form of resilience is developing strong regional and national networks. Networks help think tanks to pool their knowledge, do research together, advocate together, and mutually support each other in case one of the think tanks finds itself under political or operational pressure. Regional cooperation is especially relevant to Central Africa because many governance problems cannot be solved at the national level in Central Africa. They include conflict, cross-border insecurity, natural resource management, migration, and regional integration. Examples of such platforms in Central Africa are the Central Africa Think Tank Forum.

Think tanks are increasingly focusing on strategic communications and policy engagement. High-quality research will no longer be enough as organizations will have to present evidence in ways that policymakers, journalists, and ordinary citizens can understand and use. Think tanks can engage in policy briefs, infographics, podcasts, social media content, media commentaries, and closed policy dialogues to transform research into influence

Beyond traditional efforts to strengthen institutional resilience, governance think tanks are increasingly leveraging digital technologies to improve research production, policy outreach and organizational effectiveness. Artificial intelligence is emerging as an important component of this transition. As opposed to 57% in 2024, 71% of the organizations that participated in the 2025 State of the

Sector Report used AI tools, mostly for research and communications. However, resilience requires the responsible adoption of AI. Think tanks should establish clear AI governance policies, verify AI-generated information, protect research integrity and confidentiality, and strengthen the digital skills of their personnel.

Policy Recommendations

- National legislation: governments should guarantee freedom of association, of expression, of access to information, and public interest-based research. Laws regulating the operation of civil societies should be clear and fair and not curtail criticism.
- Regional organizations, including the African Union, ECCAS and ECOWAS, should strengthen support for think tank networks, collaborative research initiatives and policy-learning platforms. Existing initiatives such as the Central Africa Think Tank Forum demonstrate the value of peer learning and regional cooperation in strengthening governance expertise and democratic resilience.
- Think tanks should come up with sustainable models for running their affairs. They should ensure that they improve in fundraising, create local partners, offer fee-based services, and save money. Their independence must never be compromised; diversification must never influence the research process.
- Furthermore, think tanks ought to embed their security practices, both digital and physical. Organizations that engage in politically contentious governance challenges should have risk analysis tools, secure data management tools, personal safety measures, and contingency plans in place. Digital security training must be part of capacity building within organizations.
- Lastly, building resilience has to be an inclusive and generational process. Female researchers, young analysts, and researchers from marginalized groups should get equal opportunities for leading research, for developing institutional strategy, and for engaging in regional policy dialogues.

Conclusion

Governance think tanks remain an essential component of Africa's democratic infrastructure. By generating evidence, facilitating policy dialogue, strengthening accountability, and offering long-term perspectives on public policy challenges, they contribute to more informed and responsive governance systems. Yet their ability to fulfil this role increasingly depends on their capacity to operate in environments characterized by shrinking civic space, political polarization, financial uncertainty, and rapid technological change.

The challenges facing governance think tanks are significant, but they are not insurmountable. Across the continent, think tanks are responding by diversifying

funding sources, strengthening regional collaboration, investing in strategic communications, adopting digital technologies, and improving organizational resilience. However, the responsibility for protecting and strengthening these institutions cannot rest on think tanks alone. Governments, regional organizations, development partners, universities, and civil society all have a role to play in safeguarding the civic and institutional space that independent policy research requires.

As democratic governance continues to evolve across Africa, resilient and independent think tanks will remain critical to generating evidence, fostering informed public debate, and supporting effective policymaking. Strengthening these institutions is therefore not simply a matter of organizational sustainability; it is an investment in the long-term resilience of democratic governance across the continent.



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