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“BRIDGING RESEARCH AND POLICY IN NIGERIA: ROLE OF THINK TANKS AND POLICY INSTITUTES”

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Abstract

In Nigeria, the disconnection between research outputs and policymaking has contributed significantly to weak governance, poor service delivery, and suboptimal development outcomes. Despite the abundance of academic and policy research, the translation of empirical findings into actionable policies remains limited. Think tanks and policy institutes serve as intermediaries between knowledge production and policy implementation. This paper explores the roles of these institutions in enhancing evidence-based policymaking in Nigeria, highlighting their functions, challenges, and contributions. The study seeks to examine how think tanks bridge the gap between research and policy through knowledge dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and capacity building for policymakers. Employing qualitative content analysis, the study reviews existing literature and uses case studies such as the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA), and Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) to illustrate impact. Findings reveal that while think tanks have made significant inroads in influencing public policy through advocacy, roundtables, and policy briefs, they face challenges such as political interference, limited funding, and capacity constraints. The paper underscores the need for institutional support, autonomy, and strategic partnerships to strengthen the role of think tanks in Nigeria's policy landscape. The study concludes with policy recommendations that can enhance collaboration between academia, think tanks, and government institutions, thereby improving evidence-based governance and sustainable development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Think tanks, policymaking, research-policy nexus, policy institutes, Nigeria.

Introduction

Effective policymaking is predicated upon the integration of credible, timely, and relevant research into the decision-making process. In Nigeria, however, a longstanding disconnect exists between the world of research and the arena of policymaking, leading to poorly informed policy decisions, inadequate public services, and governance failures (Ayo, 2020). Despite the increasing volume of academic research in Nigeria's higher institutions and research centres, much of it is underutilised in the policy space. This disconnect raises questions about the mechanisms by which research is translated into policy and the role of intermediary institutions such as think tanks and policy institutes in this process.

Think tanks and policy institutes are non-governmental entities that conduct research, engage stakeholders, and influence policy through advocacy and evidence dissemination. Globally, they have played

pivotal roles in facilitating policy innovation, offering government's independent analysis, and providing platforms for debate and reform (McGann, 2023). In developed democracies, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, think tanks like the Brookings Institution and Chatham House have become integral to the policymaking process. In Nigeria, institutions such as the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), and the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG) are examples of local think tanks engaging in policy dialogue and influencing national development priorities (Okonkwo & Nwangwu, 2022).

However, the full potential of Nigerian think tanks in shaping policy remains largely untapped due to structural and institutional bottlenecks. These include limited financial resources, lack of autonomy, weak linkages with government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), and low capacity for policy

communication. Many Nigerian policymakers are often reluctant to engage with research outputs or sceptical of their applicability, preferring anecdotal evidence or political intuition (Adebayo, 2021).

Moreover, the environment within which these think tanks operate is often constrained by politicisation, lack of transparency, and limited access to data. Public officials are not always receptive to independent critique or recommendations that challenge prevailing narratives. In some cases, research findings are viewed through partisan lenses, thereby weakening their utility in policymaking. This has led to a situation where decision-making processes are dominated by short-term political considerations rather than long-term developmental evidence.

The core problem this paper seeks to address is how Nigeria can bridge the gap between research and policy by strengthening the role of think tanks and policy institutes. It investigates how these institutions can be better positioned, supported, and engaged to influence public policy decisions effectively. The study also examines how structural reforms, capacity development, and institutional partnerships can enhance the research-policy nexus in Nigeria. Ultimately, this paper argues that without deliberate efforts to institutionalise evidence-based policymaking, Nigeria's development trajectory will remain vulnerable to inefficiencies and policy reversals.

Research Questions

- i. How do think tanks and policy institutes contribute to bridging the gap between research and policymaking in Nigeria?
- ii. What are the main challenges inhibiting the effective influence of think tanks on public policy in Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

- i. To examine the role and strategies employed by Nigerian think tanks and policy institutes in influencing policy decisions.
- ii. To identify the barriers to effective utilisation of research in policymaking and suggest pathways to improve research-policy linkages.

Conceptual Framework

Research

Research and policy are two critical pillars of national development. The interface between them determines how evidence influences governance outcomes. In Nigeria, the interplay between research outputs, policymaking processes, and the role of intermediary institutions such as think tanks and policy institutes remains an evolving and complex terrain. A robust conceptual understanding is necessary to appreciate how research is transformed into actionable policy and how institutions can mediate this translation.

Research, in its most fundamental sense, refers to the systematic and organised investigation into a subject matter with the aim of discovering new facts, principles, or knowledge (Creswell, 2018). It involves generating data and evidence that can inform understanding, provide solutions to problems, or support decision-making. According to Punch (2016), research is "a systematic inquiry that uses disciplined methods to answer questions or solve problems." In the context of public administration, policy, and governance, research often serves as the foundation for diagnosing issues, evaluating options, and guiding reforms.

Policy

Policy, on the other hand, is defined as a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organisation or individual. Public policy, specifically, refers to decisions and actions taken by governmental actors and institutions to address societal problems. Dunn (2018) defines public policy as "a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern." Policy is therefore a dynamic process that is influenced by political, social, and economic factors. In Nigeria, policies range from economic blueprints to social protection programmes and institutional reforms, all of which are ideally guided by rigorous evidence.

In theory, the research-policy nexus should be a seamless process wherein high-quality, timely, and relevant research informs and shapes policy decisions. However, the Nigerian context presents a disconnect between these two domains. Policymaking in Nigeria is often characterised by political expediency, weak

institutional capacities, and minimal engagement with the research community (Ayo, 2020). As a result, research findings are rarely translated into actionable policy, and policies are frequently designed without reference to available evidence. This has led to suboptimal policy implementation, resource misallocation, and poor governance outcomes (Adebayo, 2021).

Think Tanks

It is within this context that think tanks and policy institutes emerge as vital actors in bridging the gap between research and policy. Think tanks are organisations that engage in the production, synthesis, and dissemination of policy-relevant research. According to McGann (2023), think tanks are “public policy research, analysis, and engagement institutions that generate evidence-based solutions to public policy challenges.” They operate at the intersection of academia, civil society, and government, producing research outputs in a form that is digestible and actionable for policymakers.

Policy Institutes

Similarly, policy institutes can be defined as institutionalised bodies either governmental or non-governmental that specialise in policy research, development, and advocacy. While the two concepts are often used interchangeably, policy institutes tend to have a more formal mandate to support policymaking through technical advice, programme evaluation, and capacity building. In Nigeria, institutions such as the Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER), Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA), and Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) exemplify the functions of both think tanks and policy institutes.

The relevance of think tanks in Nigeria stems from their role as knowledge brokers. Stone (2007) describes them as “boundary organisations” that mediate the interface between knowledge producers (academics and researchers) and knowledge users (policymakers). This brokerage function involves interpreting complex research findings, packaging them into user-friendly

formats (such as policy briefs), and advocating for their adoption by government actors.

In the Nigerian setting, think tanks also contribute to agenda-setting by highlighting emerging issues and framing them within policy discourse. The Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), for example, has successfully used its annual summits and policy roundtables to influence national development priorities, particularly in the areas of macroeconomic policy and public-private partnerships (Ojo & Agbaje, 2022).

Furthermore, think tanks engage in what Weiss (1999) termed “enlightenment functions,” where research slowly informs policy norms, values, and ideologies over time. This is particularly important in a complex policy environment like Nigeria’s, where institutional inertia and resistance to change can be strong. Through continuous engagement, think tanks can shape long-term policy perspectives and build policy literacy among both bureaucrats and political leaders.

However, the effectiveness of these institutions is contingent upon several factors. First is autonomy. Independence from political control or donor influence is crucial for think tanks to provide unbiased policy analysis (Okonkwo & Nwangwu, 2022). Second is credibility. The legitimacy of think tanks depends on the rigour of their methodologies, transparency of funding sources, and quality of human capital. Third is access to policymakers. Without formal or informal channels of influence, think tanks risk becoming mere intellectual silos disconnected from the real centres of decision-making.

One of the conceptual limitations in the Nigerian context is the lack of a formal institutional framework for incorporating think tanks into the policymaking process. Unlike in South Africa, where institutions such as the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) are embedded within government planning systems, Nigerian think tanks largely operate on the periphery of government. This limits their influence and reduces the uptake of their recommendations (Owolabi & Bello, 2021).

Another conceptual consideration is the demand side of research. Even when high-quality research is available, policymakers may lack the incentives, skills,

or institutional culture to utilise it effectively. As Lavis et al. (2003) argue, “bridging research and policy is not just about supply but also about stimulating demand through incentives and capacity building.” Therefore, strengthening the policy literacy of public officials and institutionalising the use of evidence in decision-making are equally critical.

The digital era also presents new opportunities and challenges. Think tanks can now reach broader audiences through policy podcasts, online dashboards, and data visualisations. This expands their influence beyond elite policy circles to civil society and the general public. However, it also requires new skills in communication, media engagement, and digital analytics areas where many Nigerian think tanks are still developing capacity (McGann, 2023).

For the purpose of this study, the concept “Bridging Research and Policy in Nigeria: Role of Think Tanks and Policy Institutes” is defined as the systematic process through which empirical evidence produced by research institutions is translated into practical policy recommendations by think tanks and policy institutes, with the aim of improving governance and development outcomes in Nigeria. It encompasses knowledge production, policy communication, stakeholder engagement, and institutional collaboration within a dynamic political and socio-economic context.

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the understanding that effective policy depends on the quality and applicability of research, and that intermediary institutions think tanks and policy institutes play a central role in ensuring that this research is communicated, understood, and adopted by policymakers. The relationship is not linear but iterative, shaped by institutional incentives, political dynamics, and the capacity of both knowledge producers and users. Strengthening this ecosystem is essential for Nigeria’s pursuit of evidence-based governance and sustainable development.

Review of Related Literature

Think tanks are often described as “bridges” between knowledge and policy, serving to synthesise complex data into accessible formats for decision-makers (Stone, 2007). They play a central role in generating evidence,

advocating reform, and engaging in policy dialogue. McGann (2023) notes that globally, think tanks have gained increased relevance in shaping economic, political, and social policies due to their ability to respond quickly and flexibly to pressing policy issues.

In the Nigerian context, several think tanks have emerged since the 1990s, most notably NISER, CDD, CSEA, IPCR, and NESG. These organisations have focused on areas such as economic reform, democratic governance, conflict resolution, and public service delivery. According to Ojo and Agbaje (2022), the Nigerian Economic Summit Group has significantly influenced national economic planning through annual economic summits and policy briefs submitted to the National Assembly.

However, the literature also points to systemic challenges facing these institutions. Adebayo (2021) highlights the funding constraints that limit independent research and hinder long-term programming. Similarly, Okonkwo & Nwangwu (2022) argue that weak linkages between think tanks and government MDAs reduce the uptake of research findings. There is also a noted lack of robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track how research inputs inform policy outcomes.

Some scholars advocate for stronger institutional frameworks to foster collaboration. For example, the establishment of policy-research units within ministries could ensure continuous dialogue between researchers and policymakers (Owolabi & Bello, 2021). International examples, such as South Africa’s Human Sciences Research Council, provide models for integrating research into government planning structures.

Furthermore, the digital age has altered the *modus operandi* of think tanks. As noted by McGann (2023), social media, policy podcasts, and open data platforms have emerged as tools for expanding think tanks’ reach and visibility. Nigerian think tanks have begun to adopt these tools, but a significant digital divide persists, particularly in rural areas.

In sum, the literature reveals both the potential and constraints of think tanks in Nigeria’s policy ecosystem. There is a consensus that enhancing the capacity, autonomy, and influence of these institutions is critical to fostering evidence-based governance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, employing secondary data analysis and case study design. Data were collected from academic journal articles, policy reports, government publications, think tank briefs, and relevant literature from 2015 to 2024. A purposive sampling technique was used to select three key Nigerian think tanks Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), Centre for the Study of the Economies of Africa (CSEA), and Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) based on their documented policy engagement and visibility.

The study uses content analysis to assess how these institutions contribute to policy development, what strategies they employ, and what barriers they encounter. Analytical focus was placed on thematic areas such as advocacy methods, research dissemination, stakeholder engagement, and institutional challenges.

Triangulation was employed by comparing findings from academic literature with grey literature from NGOs, international agencies (e.g., UNDP, World Bank), and Nigerian government reports. This method ensured validity and provided a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between research and policy. The study's conceptual framework is grounded in the Knowledge-to-Policy (K2P) model, which describes how research knowledge is translated into policy action (Lavis et al., 2003).

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis reveals that think tanks in Nigeria perform various functions, including policy research, issue advocacy, capacity building, and convening policy dialogues. For example, NESG has influenced economic policies through its annual summits and by producing accessible policy briefs for lawmakers. Similarly, CSEA conducts empirical research on macroeconomic and fiscal issues and engages with MDAs through technical workshops.

However, challenges abound. Most think tanks face unstable funding, often relying on international donors with shifting priorities. This hampers their ability to sustain long-term research initiatives. Additionally, political interference remains a major concern. Research

that critiques government performance is often sidelined or rejected outright (Adebayo, 2021).

There is also a communication gap between researchers and policymakers. Academic reports are often too technical or lengthy, making them inaccessible to decision-makers. Furthermore, there is limited demand for research among public officials, many of whom rely more on political expediency than data.

Despite these challenges, think tanks have begun to adopt digital tools, public dashboards, and interactive workshops to improve knowledge uptake. Building trust, simplifying communication, and fostering ongoing relationships with government actors have proven to be effective strategies.

Thus, strengthening institutional autonomy and integrating policy units into government structures could significantly enhance policy impact.

Policy or Administrative Implications

The findings of this study have far-reaching implications for public policy and administrative governance in Nigeria. First, they highlight the urgent need to institutionalise evidence-based policymaking. Government ministries, departments, and agencies must establish dedicated policy-research units that collaborate closely with think tanks to integrate research into national development plans. Doing so will reduce reliance on political guesswork and promote data-informed decisions.

Second, policies that support the operational independence and sustainable financing of think tanks should be enacted. Without institutional autonomy, these bodies cannot provide unbiased policy alternatives or critique. The government, private sector, and development partners should co-invest in national think tank endowment funds to provide predictable funding streams.

Third, civil service reforms should include training programs for policymakers on the use and interpretation of research. Many government actors lack the capacity to critically assess research reports or understand how to translate them into practical policies. Lastly, there should be a legal framework for the formal engagement of think tanks in policymaking processes. This could include advisory roles in national planning

committees, legislative committees, and presidential task forces.

These reforms would improve policy coherence, enhance governance, and ensure that development interventions align with local needs and empirical realities.

Conclusion

Bridging the gap between research and policy is vital for Nigeria's democratic and developmental consolidation. Think tanks and policy institutes, if properly empowered, can serve as vital conduits for translating research into policy. However, they face several institutional, financial, and political constraints that undermine their effectiveness. By investing in collaborative frameworks, building institutional capacities, and fostering a culture of evidence-based

decision-making, Nigeria can transform its policy landscape. This transformation will not only enhance governance but also promote sustainable national development driven by research, innovation, and inclusivity.

Recommendations

- i. Establish formal policy partnerships between think tanks and government agencies to institutionalise evidence-based policy engagement and enhance the uptake of research in public service delivery.
- ii. Create a national research-policy integration strategy that includes sustainable funding for think tanks, legal frameworks for collaboration, and mandatory training on policy research for public officials.

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