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Expert Comment

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Cooperation between Africa and the EU: The role of think tanks

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What are the challenges when discussing the current state of cooperation between Africa and the European Union (EU)? Different scholars from both African and European countries gathered together at the LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome on 14-15 June 2018 to discuss this important topic. The theme was challenging and given the focus of my research on think tanks and policy research institutes in authoritarian states and developing countries, for the purpose of this article I will focus specifically on the strategies and synergies developed by European and African think tanks in light of the cooperation framework between Africa and the European Union (EU).

Substantial evidence exists to demonstrate that policy knowledge, when developed outside traditional governmental frameworks, improves policymaking and helps strengthen cooperation at the international level among states, organisations, and non-state actors. This paper analyses the current role of think tanks with a focus on their contributions to policy knowledge production.

Whereas scholarship working on European and American think tanks has developed substantially in recent decades, African think tanks today still remain an understudied phenomenon. As such, a primary priority here is to balance these gaps in the international relations/think tank literature. Furthermore, due to difficulties in assessing African think tanks' direct impact in the public and foreign policy domains, a secondary priority is to show how they occupy a 'special niche' in the African policy process, specifically vis-à-vis the EU-Africa cooperation framework.

The EU-Africa partnership

The African continent represents a key priority for the European Union (EU Commission, 2018). The cooperative framework is organised through two main channels: the Cotonou agreement and the Joint Africa-EU strategy (JAES). The former is the overarching framework for EU relations with African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries; it was adopted in 2000 to replace the 1975 Lomé Convention and it is based on three main pillars: development cooperation; economic and trade cooperation; and a political dimension. The Joint Africa-EU strategy is the formal channel through which the EU maintains relations with African countries and their most important supra-national organisation, the African Union (AU).

JAES was adopted in 2007 in Lisbon during the 2nd EU-Africa Summit. It represents an essential guidance tool defining the orientation, as well as the general objectives, of the EU-AU Partnership. The JAES was implemented by a First Action Plan, 2008-2010, and by a Second Action Plan, 2011-2013. However, initial assessments of the two plans highlighted limited strategic engagement of crucial actors like civil society organisations and African regional organisations as part of the process, by both the EU and African states (Pirozzi, 2012).

In 2014, at the 4th EU-Africa Summit in Brussels, in order to further implement the partnership, the Joint Strategy *Roadmap 2014-2017* was launched. As the most relevant outcome of the meeting, five key areas for cooperation were identified: peace and security; democracy, good governance, and human rights; human development; sustainable and inclusive development and growth and continental integration; and global and emerging issues.

Even more importantly, in 2017, EU and African leaders gathered together in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. This time, the outcome of the 5th African Union – European Union Summit was the drafting of a joint declaration in which common priorities for the future of the Africa-

Europe partnership were highlighted: a focus on people; education, technology, science and skills development; resilience, peace and security governance; migration and mobility; and African's infrastructure development.

As the formal political channel through which the EU and the African continent work together, the Africa-EU Partnership therefore remains a useful reference point in order to understand the role non-state actors can play in the Africa-Europe relationship. The aim of the strategic partnership is to promote common interests in different areas, from economic development to sustainable development. In particular, the partnership aims to strengthen political relations between the European Union and the African states through essential cooperation on migration, the environment, peace and security, trade, and regional cooperation.

The partnership was launched at the first Africa-EU Summit in Cairo in 2000. Even acknowledging that the EU, the AU, and the heads of state and government meetings remain of fundamental importance, an essential role is also played by civil society actors. In fact, the Africa – EU Partnership counts civil society organisations, private and business sectors, youth organisations, economic and social actors, and academic institutions among its major stakeholders. This means that in parallel with institutional meetings, such as formal summits or EU-AU ministerial meetings, a vast network of other stakeholders exists, as evidenced by informal dialogues that contribute important views and recommendations for different sectors to the partnership, such as the Africa-EU civil society fora or the Africa-EU business fora.

Think tanks and the Africa-Europe relationship

It is precisely within such a framework that one can envision a strategic role for think tanks and policy research organisations in strengthening the EU-Africa partnership. This is clear from officially documented meetings as key areas for cooperation have presumed an

enhancement of political dialogues, research cooperation, people-to-people exchanges, and so on. The role of policy experts as ‘key mediators’ or ‘policy entrepreneurs’ – through inter-regional workshops, conferences, joint research projects and summits – should not and cannot therefore be underestimated.

Think tanks can exercise power through discursive practices. Nevertheless, efforts by European and African think tanks to establish inter-regional dialogues and common ground for research on Africa-Europe relations is limited in comparison with other inter-regional contexts, such as think tank dialogues and summits surrounding EU-China or China-US relations. The main reason for this should be contextualised by the limited internationalisation of think tanks in Africa, in parallel with what could be defined as an inward-looking approach to policy research and expertise.

The main policy areas in which African think tanks are involved – both in the private sector and the civil society domain – are economic growth and development; peace and security; regional integration and trade; national sector strategies and long term national visions; sustainable growth through financing for development; and greater investment in social and innovative sectors. According to the *2015 Africa Think Tank Summit Report* published by the University of Pennsylvania, which discusses African think tanks’ major roles, current developments, and most serious challenges, African think tanks perform different functions, among which they,

- Help policymakers to better understand how to shape African institutions through African cultural identity;
- Strategise as to how to best include women and younger generations in discussions about the future of the continent;
- Maximise the role technology can play in social development.

However, the report is based on the enduring assumption that policy research organisations have to be modelled on a Western-led style of independent think tanks in order to develop correctly, which means mirroring their US or European counterparts. In the literature, this kind of bias is not only discussed vis-à-vis the African research environment, but is part of a broader argument in which scholars tend to oppose Western-style think tanks versus ‘the rest’ of the world.

Not surprisingly, as far back as 2011, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) published a report on African think tanks showing that only by considering the political landscape in Africa is one able to properly understand the policy context in which think tanks operate. In the past 50 or 60 years, the political development of African institutions has been shaped by different historical phases, from the era of colonialism and post-independence movements, to single-party-rule, up to the rise of authoritarianism and just more recently, political and economic liberalisation. To this list of influences we must add other two political phenomena that have marked the developments of African think tanks: the concentration of power in the hands of a few individuals; and the external influence exercised by both states and non-state actors on the way the African political community has taken major decisions over the course of different decades (ODI, 2011).

These four political phases and their peculiarities represent starting points to understanding the think tank context in Africa. Beyond this, there is a need to distinguish different types of organisation and different kinds of people in charge of policy research in Africa (ODI, 2011): there are colonial and national-state affiliated research institutes; university-based research organisations; foreign experts and institutions; and civil society organisations.

Clearly, this classification is rather difficult to apply outside the African context, justifying the necessity to analyse African think tanks within the political context in which they are established.

To offer further details on the various kinds of organisation, colonial and national-state affiliated research institutes are those organisations founded by foreign, colonial powers, i.e., France or the UK, and then transformed into national policy research organisations focusing on the development of the African continent. One example is the West African Institute for Policy and Research (WAIPR), established in Nigeria in the 1950s. A different scenario is represented by research organisations based within universities. However, important differences persist between think tanks and university research organisations in terms of their core business, funding, policy-knowledge accumulation, and capacity-building strategies.

For the African continent, understanding development and economic progress based on research and study has become an increasingly important priority in recent years. The very development of Africa's major political institutions and the projection of its international relations with third parties are heavily constrained by the opportunities academics, experts, and intellectuals – and the African intelligentsia more broadly – have to affect policy outcomes.

According to McGann (2015), think tanks should have the transformation of the African continent as central to their agendas. How? By offering new ideas to governments and rule-makers on how to implement their relations with the world. During the Think Tanks Summit held in Addis Ababa in 2015, the think tank network built around the participation of the major sponsorship sustained by the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) and the Think Tanks and Civil Society Program (TTCSP) from the University of Pennsylvania represented a first attempt to formulate a specific strategy African think tanks should follow in order to strengthen their effectiveness and potential. This resulted in specific recommendations to improve the future performance of African think tanks, among which the most important were: mobilising of financial resources; developing effective strategies to reach policymakers and achieve policy impact; harnessing the use of technology;

increasing research capacity; and last but not least, strengthening attention at both domestic and international levels on the Africa Agenda 2063.¹

If we apply a broad definition of what a think tank is, i.e., a policy research organisation participating in the policymaking process, then we can distinguish four different types of think tanks in Africa.

Independent institutes are think tanks that were established only recently in Africa. They are still almost totally financed by Western/foreign donors. One example is the Centre for the Study of Economies in Africa. Established in 2007, it is funded entirely by the Think Tank Initiative (Canada).

Autonomous institutes are organisations founded in accordance with African law, and therefore seen as legitimate by governments but without being economically sponsored or supported by them. Western governments fund them through multilateral parallel initiatives and they accept government and private-sector financial input for specific tasks. One example is the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA). The Think Tanks Initiative and the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) provide most sponsorship for the organisation, apart from the Kenyan government. The ACBF was established in 1991 through the joint efforts of the African Development Bank, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Semi-autonomous organisations are think tanks established directly by the government. For instance, the Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI) defines itself as a semi-autonomous research organisation. It was set up in Addis Ababa in 1999 by the Ethiopian government with the task of conducting rigorous policy analysis to strengthen

¹Agenda 2063 is a strategic framework for the socio-economic transformation of the continent over the next 50 years. It builds on and seeks to accelerate the implementation of past and existing continental initiatives for growth and sustainable development (African Union website, 2019).

the knowledge-building process among the Ethiopian institutions. Its major research interests lead to analysis of the Ethiopian society and culture.

University-affiliated institutes are research organisations administrated directly by universities. One example is the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research established in Ghana in 1969. The Institute is affiliated with the College of Humanities at the University of Ghana.

From a first evaluation of the major functions performed by think tanks in Africa, we can affirm that for the most part, their research activities are devoted to building relevant policy knowledge – and to increasing its dissemination – about Africa’s development. Major research interests concern economic and social development; agricultural activities and food security; and the environment and climate change. Much less activity seems to be devoted by policy research organisations towards international affairs, a counter-trend compared with other parts of the world – for example, China – in which think tanks are now emerging as an essential tool to strengthen states’ soft power abroad.

Inter-regional think tank initiatives vis-à-vis the Africa-EU Partnership

In recent years, numerous events organised on an inter-regional level have been held between EU-based and African think tanks. These have largely been roundtable discussions lasting only a few days in which academics and think tank personnel gather together to discuss further possibilities for cooperation. This is based on the belief that evidence-based research undertaken by think tanks provides a guidance tool to further understanding policy development in Africa as well as African states’ external relations.

For example, African think tanks can help EU staff delegations with the practical implementation of policy and project/programme identification and formulation (capacity4dev.eu, 2013). One example is the EU-Africa Strategic Dialogue, organised in 2017 by the Policy Center for the New South and other European think tanks among which

is the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), an organisation that, following the publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, intensified its research and analysis focus on Africa, particularly on matters affecting EU-Africa relations.

At the beginning of 2019, the Policy Center for the New South (OCPPC), in partnership with the French-based IFRI (Institute Francais des Relations Internationales) and the Italian ISPI (Istituto di Studi Politici Internazionali) organised the 4x4 Directors Forum, an annual meeting gathering the directors of four European and four African think tanks with the intent to build solid bridges between the African and European continents. Among the topics discussed were migration, energy, sustainable development, and foreign presence in Africa (OCPPC, 2019).

Another attempt to further strengthen EU-Africa cooperation through the think tank sector is represented by the numerous initiatives organised by the Italy-based private organisation The European House – Ambrosetti. As far back as 2007, the foundation organised an international forum titled ‘Developing the regions of Africa and Europe’. The forum was held five times between 2007 and 2011 with the involvement of African ministers, representatives from European government, business people, investors, and academics. Since 2014, the Ambrosetti House has mainly focused its strategy on South Africa, with the launch that year of the South Africa-Italy Summit, and it maintains an interest in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region (The Ambrosetti House, 2019). The SADC is an inter-governmental organisation founded in 1992 in Namibia with the objective of reinforcing cooperation and development among southern African states.

Conclusions

Given the unprecedented expansion of the think tank sector around the world, it seems clear that think tanks and policy research organisations in Africa deserve increased attention. However, it should be noted that the EU is not the only actor aware of the importance think

tank inter-regional dialogues play in the international arena, particularly with reference to Africa.

This is not only because there has been an increase in competition, but the EU seems to be a relative latecomer compared with China, for example. As a part of China's strategy to expand its soft power abroad, it established a formal think tank dialogue as far back as 2011, 'the China-Africa Think Tanks Forum'. The forum is an essential tool in China's Africa strategy and is organised every year ahead of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the official channel through which China manages its diplomatic agenda with African states. The 2018 edition saw the presence of more than 380 representatives from both sides (Chinaafrica.cn, 2019), with numbers far exceeding those of initiatives launched by European think tanks.

From a broader perspective, the biggest challenge for think tanks today may be the emergence of 'post-truth politics' in parallel with the exponential expansion of the policy analysis industry. It is in this context that think tanks could become the standard-setters and arbiters of quality 21st-century policy analysis (Hernando, Stone, and Pautz, 2019). For this reason, the EU should further institutionalise its inter-regional dialogue with African research institutions; that is, it cannot solely rely on official meetings and conferences carried out by individual think tank initiatives.

It will be especially necessary to establish a clearer strategy for long-term objectives, among which this author believes the establishment of formal channels at the EU-level are essential for think tanks' inter-regional cooperation with Africa. Such channels should produce evidence-based policy analysis with the intention of profoundly improving the many challenges relations between the Union and African states: firstly, the issue of migration, but also, economic development in Africa and political relations between African states and the EU.

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