

# Knowledge dependence and its discontents: the demand for policy research in Africa in the era of globalization

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*In the early days of independence there was a congruency between the intellectual ideology of the time and the development policy focus of many African states, with strong demand for domestic policy research. In contrast, the era of structural adjustment and current globalization fostered knowledge dependence, through un-negotiated policy options that tied development aid to the acceptance of 'external' knowledge. Today, there are new opportunities due to new leadership in the continent and the various new economic development plans that could provide the basis for a stronger domestic research–policy interface. The development of the continent will require a political leadership that appreciates the intellectual capacity of Africans, a core of confident, liberated intellectual freedom fighters who are ready to use their knowledge to liberate the continent from poverty, and the emergence of new institutions such as the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS) that would provide the platform.*

## 1 Introduction

There is a great deal of interest in understanding policy-making processes in Africa, and the role of research in informing policy decisions and actions. Ideally, equal emphasis should be placed on both. It is only when we understand the political economy of decision making that can construct the form and content of policy advice based on new knowledge, and direct such advice to appropriate decision centres.

In spite of the urgency of the need to understand the role of research in informing policy decisions and actions, very little intellectual capital has been spent on such inquiries. Yet, donor agencies and some African governments continue to spend a great deal of resources on policy research. The research-policy nexus is not linear, even in advanced countries, and even when governments of those countries are funding the research. Carol Weiss noted the haphazard connection between social science research and policy making in the United States, and the misguided belief by many social scientists involved in policy research that the results of their work would be used by the government. Weiss observed that they 'tend to believe that if officials ignore relevant research, they are either ignorant, uncaring, or overtly "political" in the pejorative sense of the word'.<sup>2</sup> This means that in assessing the research-policy

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<sup>2</sup> Weiss (1995).

interface, a fair amount of value must be assigned to serendipity and knowledge externalities that may not be readily captured and quantified.

In Africa the situation is even more complicated. The policy terrain is murkier, due largely to domestic pressures and the heavy external influence from decision centres located outside the official bureaucracies. Borrowing from work on the politics of trade policy making in Africa, it has been noted that ‘... the underlying forces behind policy epochs and episodes vary from country to country and from regime to regime weaved around ethnic, military or other ruling and bureaucratic interests in a manner that suggests a forced consensus ... the loss of policy autonomy in most countries and the absence of the organized private sector as key players in the policy process compound the picture’.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, a tradition of contesting ideas has not been firmly established in Africa, due to the lack of a home-grown vision by the leadership, inadequate knowledge-generating infrastructures and weak intellectual censorship, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Such contests would have forced the competing constituencies to rely on research to support and advance their positions on how to attain a given vision. In the United States in the 1930s, such contests were sometimes played out in the arena of science and technology (S&T) policy making. Between 1933 and 1935, for instance, Karl Compton, then President of MIT, proposed that greater funding be directed to university-based scientific research in order to generate innovation that firms could use to create new industries that would in turn create jobs. Unemployment was a major issue at that time, and Compton lobbied President Roosevelt and the public with a campaign, ‘science makes jobs’, stating that ‘federal funding could make jobs by making science’. His views were hotly contested by those who held that technological innovation caused unemployment by raising productivity without providing other avenues for taking care of the resulting redundancies. They therefore urged the President not to heed the Compton campaign but rather to regulate the pace of technological change in order not to exacerbate the unemployment problem.<sup>4</sup>

Three important points emerge from this example with respect to the research-policy interface. First, it is useful to have a market for contestation of policy ideas. Second, policy entrepreneurship is critical in bridging the research-policy gap. Third, policy research priority setting involves many players and can be demand or supply driven, depending on the coalition for policy change and the institutional arrangements on the ground. In Africa, all of these conditions have, for the most part, been either weak or absent.

## 2 The legacy of dependence

Without labouring the point, colonialism was anti-indigenous knowledge and technology. It created a legacy of knowledge and technology dependency that is still very much in evidence. The cultural emasculation of the colonial era denied Africa both the capacity to generate, disseminate and adapt knowledge in an orderly and

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<sup>3</sup> Soludo *et al.* (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Hart (1998).

progressive manner, and the establishment of a knowledge order that would have evolved systematically as societal requirements became more complex.

Africa is perpetually going through forced technological transitions, first by colonialism, second, by post-colonial ties, and most recently by globalization. Unfortunately, this last transition is embedded in consumerism without a corresponding interest in building indigenous production technology capacities and capabilities. As Ali Mazrui put it, ‘the West’s consumption patterns have arrived, but not necessarily the West’s technique of production’.<sup>5</sup> In the same vein, Kabiru Kinyanjui noted that ‘the cultural dynamism of any society enables its members to discard old ideas and techniques and to be receptive and accommodating to new knowledge, skills, technologies and patterns of life ... A central obstacle to this process in Africa has been the separation of African culture from the culture that guided major economic, technological and political changes in society’.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the material reality of this dependence, both the psychological dimension and the phenomenon of self-doubt it engendered have been profound, and have enormous implications for research agenda setting, research–policy links and technological renaissance.

### **3 The convergence of national vision and intellectual ideology**

On coming to power after independence, African leaders and their economic advisers had a common focus and strategy. The focus was industrialization and the strategy was import substitution. The spirit of *Uhuru* (freedom), *Ujamaa* (self-help), and the indigenization policies of the many newly independent countries were used to rally society, policy advisers and the research community to a common cause. While this is not the place to debate the efficacy of these policies and programmes, what is important is that there was a convergence of national vision and intellectual ideology. There was agreement on the vision, and on the path to take to attain it. It was therefore easy to agree on a set of research priorities and on the research infrastructure that would feed into the development policy process. In the pursuit of this agreed strategy, it was easy to mobilize intellectual capital both from Africa itself and from other countries pursuing similar strategies.

The point here is that the ownership of a development strategy and the goals of a society are critical to influencing the direction of research and its practical application, and hence, to bridging the research–policy gap. Policy advisers must be chosen by the policy makers themselves and their nationality should really not matter. In the demand for research, the centrality of this point cannot be overemphasized. Part of the reason for the economic success of Botswana was its independence in choosing its key advisers, some of whom were non-nationals. These were not fly-by-night advisers but resident experts who took time to understand the policy environment and to explain their positions in open seminars, including one-to-one meetings with cabinet ministers and parliamentarians.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mazrui (1990).

<sup>6</sup> Kinyanjui (1993).

<sup>7</sup> Stiglitz (2002).

In the field of S&T policy, the convergence was both subterranean and explicit in the early days of independence. In pursuit of an industrialization strategy, it was clear that an independent technological trajectory was being charted. The import policy was in favour of capital goods, and there was robust research that supported this policy and emphasized indigenous technological capability building, learning and knowledge spillovers.

#### **4 Knowledge dependence, policy autonomy and demand for research**

Policy making in Africa in the 1980s and 1990s was dominated by what is widely known as the ‘Washington consensus’. By implication, two institutions in Washington, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, agreed on both the diagnosis for the lack of economic progress in Africa and the preferred solutions. Needless to say, African leaders and peoples were not consulted; they disagreed significantly with both the analysis of the problems and the solutions that the two institutions forced them to adopt. Interestingly, at this time African leaders met under the auspices of the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU) and produced their own blueprint for Africa’s economic renewal, the Lagos Plan of Action.<sup>8</sup> This platform had a clear roadmap specifying how to lay solid scientific and technological foundations for sustainable social and economic development in Africa, but it was completely subverted by the Washington consensus.

The neoclassical thinking and the market fundamentalism so central to the Washington consensus did not allow for any alternative view. African governments, by then heavily indebted and reliant on the IMF and the World Bank to bail them out of their economic quagmires, capitulated and reluctantly adopted their policies. The ideas and knowledge from Washington were backed by financial resources, and the role of the IMF as the global arbiter of good policies precluded access to other external sources of finance if a country’s rating, in their judgement, was unsatisfactory. Many in civil society and the international community did not fully appreciate the dangers inherent in this strategy of bundling together economic ideology and aid.

These predatory tactics stimulated a game plan on the part of African policy makers, who adopted ‘stop and go’ tactics as far as the implementation of the agreed policies was concerned. Not fully convinced about the policies in the first place, they took a piecemeal approach to their implementation and used delaying tactics to extract further monetary concessions from the Bank and IMF, almost on a *quid pro quo* basis. The two Washington institutions, anxious to show quick and positive results, coupled with other political considerations, often obliged. Rather than improve economic performance, this cat and mouse game created more development problems. It did not occur to African governments that mobilizing the intellectual capital of their own citizens and other disparate but friendly views from the international community to challenge the Washington consensus would have been a better strategy.

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<sup>8</sup> OAU (1980).

However, with its growing financial muscle and influence in Washington, the government of Japan sought to encourage an alternative view. It sought to promote economic policies that emphasized the role of the state, drawing lessons from the public policies that had produced the East Asian economic miracle. Unfortunately, it gave resources to the World Bank to conduct the research and to document how these policies worked. Evidently, the Bank was not prepared to contradict itself, exposing by implication that their policy prescriptions for Africa were ideological and that the only alternative view was still its own.

The outcome of this exercise was a book, *The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy*.<sup>9</sup> In a critique of the book, and more importantly of the process of writing the book, Robert Wade indicated that the ‘final document reflects an attempt at compromise between the well-established World Bank view and the newly powerful Japanese view. The result is heavily weighted towards the Bank’s established position, and legitimizes the bank’s continuing advice to low-income countries to follow the “market-friendly” policies apparently vindicated by East Asia’s success’.<sup>10</sup> This experience is important because even though the World Bank’s paradigm emerged intact, it conceded some intellectual grounds to another powerful donor. There was no such concession to poor African countries. It therefore became extremely difficult to view the Bank as an honest broker that was willing to draw from certain intellectual traditions and cultures but not from others.

The loss of sovereignty and policy autonomy in most of Africa was aptly captured by Joseph Stiglitz in an account of Ethiopian experience with the IMF.<sup>11</sup> The Ethiopian government, after due analysis, decided that it made better economic sense to pay off a loan owed to an American bank, at a huge interest rate, by drawing from its foreign reserves that were attracting very low interest. Rather than applaud this sensible domestic initiative, the IMF officials were upset, and threatened to cut Ethiopia from its programme. At issue was not the economic sense of the action itself, but that the action was not authorized by the IMF. As Stiglitz put it ‘to Ethiopia such intrusiveness smacked of a new form of colonialism; to the IMF, it was just standard operating procedure’.

There is virtually no country in Africa that has not experienced such policy emasculation. In the late 1990s, for example, the Ugandan Ministry of Trade and Industry wanted to initiate a process to recreate and support its research unit that was virtually non-existent. The minister was asked how his ministry generated the knowledge and facts with which his officials negotiated with the World Bank and the IMF on trade policies. Looking baffled, he calmly explained, in a fatherly but resigned voice, that they did not negotiate. In a nutshell, he said ‘they have the money, they have the ideas and we need the money. What is there to negotiate?’

What this minister did not realize was that, as George Soros noted in a discussion of reality, fallibility and reflexivity, ‘the shortcomings of dominant ideas and institutional arrangements become apparent only with passage of time, and the concept of reflexivity justifies only the claim that all human constructs are potentially

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<sup>9</sup> IBRD (1993).

<sup>10</sup> Wade (1996).

<sup>11</sup> Stiglitz (2002).

flawed ... nobody is in possession of the ultimate truth'.<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, many of the economic policy proposals flaunted at that time as 'gospel truth' were flawed.

The 1980s saw the emergence of international agricultural research organizations with a mandate to support Africa's development efforts. Supposed to champion Africa's green revolution, several of these organizations were grouped under the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). An implication of this arrangement was that resources that would have gone to national research institutions went to these international bodies, which were supposed to assemble the best minds to address specific agricultural problems. In addition, it sent a signal that someone else was adequately taking care of the research needs of the agricultural sector and that African policy makers need not worry. This further widened the gap between African researchers, the national research institutions and the policy makers.

Twenty years later with millions of dollars spent, questions are now being raised as to the impact of the CGIAR institutes. In reviewing the performance of these international research centres, it became clear that their envisaged relationships with national agricultural research institutions are often very weak. This weakness meant that the platform for transmitting the results of the research of the CGIAR centres to African farmers was broken. The top-down approach lacked the necessary sensitivity to national institutional set-ups, incentive structures and local conditions, and was devoid of an atmosphere that encouraged knowledge exchange and mutually reinforced learning. Bypassing the national research institutions was disastrous, as the CGIAR centres lacked adequate knowledge of African farmers and their socio-cultural environment. The outcome of this was a distorted relationship between policy makers, African researchers and the donor community in a manner that reinforced donor-driven research agendas.

## **5 Inept African leadership**

True, there was coercion and almost a sense of infallibility among IMF and World Bank economists, but it also reflects the ineptitude of many African leaders, and their willingness to simply give up without any serious attempt to engage the 'opponent'. In fact, there is evidence that African government negotiators, if equipped with adequate information and supported by their best economists, could tilt the results of the negotiations with the two Washington institutions slightly in their favour. For instance, in its negotiations for a first structural adjustment package in the late 1980s, the Tanzanian government used an economy-wide model developed by a group of Tanzanian economists with support from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The economists were part of the government negotiating team and used the model effectively to counter some of the policy proposals that were put forward by the Washington economists and, in the process, obtained a result that was reasonably acceptable to Tanzania.<sup>13</sup>

This is still not common practice. Most African government negotiators are civil servants who do not use the products of research to support their arguments. In many

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<sup>12</sup> Soros (1998).

<sup>13</sup> Internal IDRC documentation.

instances, they sign whatever documents have been prepared and busy themselves with personal matters as they travel on national assignments. Visits to Washington to negotiate with the IMF and the World Bank are regarded as favours, and come with perks that supplement their incomes. Larger national goals are often secondary to the private benefits. When technical assistance is required, governments have allowed the Washington institutions to recommend experts from abroad without seriously attempting to use their own research institutions or the technical expertise of their nationals. These foreign experts, who are often paid by the World Bank or IMF, and justified on the basis of lack of analytical capacity in Africa, reach the same conclusions and make similar proposals to those offered from Washington.

Over time, the intellectual dependence has deepened. Some independent-minded African researchers began to lose confidence, others turned to consultancy work, while yet others took a pragmatic and 'more rewarding' approach of doing research whose results were always in conformity with the Washington consensus, and thus guaranteed them a steady stream of assignments. More than anything else, this intellectual dependence has fostered the notion of globalized knowledge in a globalized world ... all 'sensible policies' worked well at all times and in all places. Worse still, the notion that knowledge is generated in the North and consumed in the South has been erroneously accepted.

In a climate where there has been no alternative view, no national vision, and a complete loss of policy autonomy, and where governments were inept and lacked confidence in the expertise of their own nationals, what would be the essence of policy research, and to satisfy whose demand? Strategically, it could be targeted at World Bank and IMF officials as an indirect route to African policy makers. Unfortunately, African researchers lacked an effective organizational framework that would have made this possible. Everyone accepted that the experts in Washington had all the answers, which were backed up with their own intellectual capital.

## **6 S&T policy research and Africa's economic renewal**

For most of the 1980s and 1990s, in an environment preoccupied with market determinism and intellectual dependence, S&T policy research had no place in the scheme of things either in Washington or among African governments. First, science and technology policy implies interference in the normal functioning of the market. Once the economy was fixed, the doctrinaire proponents assumed, everything else would follow. But how could one have fixed an economy without the effective integration of science and technology plans with economic plans? Second, the weakened African states had lost their vision of industrialization, and hence paid no attention to science and technology that would have underpinned an industrialization process. Yet S&T-led development is a leadership-cum-state-led endeavour. Third, with rapid breakthroughs in global science and technology research leading to 'forced transitions' to knowledge-laden goods, services and processes, Africa lacked both the human and infrastructural capacity to interrogate, adapt, absorb or reject these changes.

Existing science institutions have not had the resources to conduct any meaningful research. Except in agriculture, science in Africa was not easily linked to production, as scientists and engineers did their work without considering what the market or the private sector wanted. The intermediation role of government in bringing together the knowledge and production sectors as perfected by the governments of Finland, the Netherlands and Taiwan was completely absent.

The Finnish model, as exemplified in the production of Nokia mobile phones, is most instructive.<sup>14</sup> The partnership between knowledge centres, including universities, research institutes and science parks on the one hand, and venture capitalists and the phone company on the other, with the government assuming a very strong steering role, created what became known as a ‘national product’ – the Nokia mobile phone. The reorganization of the government to recognize the cross-cutting nature of science and technology and its link to production led to the creation of the Finnish Science and Technology Commission, chaired by the President of Finland, with the Ministers of Education (higher education) and Industry as vice-chairs, thus emphasizing the link between knowledge and production.

In Africa, however, very few people inside or outside of government understand the wider importance of S&T policy and the need to re-engineer knowledge institutions to become product-driven. The scientific community has always been overly concerned with research and development (R&D) and declining budget allocations. While these concerns are legitimate, few researchers and policy makers understand the importance of generating technology from technology, the wider implications of technological innovation for Africa’s economic renewal, or the need to re-engineer existing institutions to supply knowledge to the productive sectors. This latter concern is in the realm of social science and S&T policy analysis. But with little capacity in this field, it has been difficult to generate any demand for research or for senior scholars to assume the role of S&T policy entrepreneurs or champions. The first order of business has been to build institutional and research capacity in this field.

## **7 Creating the demand for S&T policy research**

Given the importance of knowledge in development, and the critical importance of S&T policy research for Africa’s economic renewal, there is an urgent need to create the demand for policy research, especially for S&T policy research. New opportunities are emerging in Africa that are likely to create a platform for improved demand for research, a more focused research agenda and stronger linkages between research and the productive sectors. But it will require a lot of work to take advantage of these opportunities. These include the national economic recovery plans or strategies being put together by many African governments, new visionary & nationalistic leadership, improved political participation and space for dialogue, and the framework of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). In addition, African governments such as those of Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, have established economic and social advisory councils, appointed high-ranking advisers on policy and planning as well as on science and technology. These are new

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<sup>14</sup> Castells and Himanen (2002).

developments that augur well for a strong research–policy interface. The critical question remains whether the international community will respect these groups and individuals, and provide them the administrative and intellectual space they need to be effective.

The national economic recovery plans or strategies are particularly important because they are mostly home-grown, and are driven by the desire of the new democratic governments to deliver the ‘democracy dividend’. The whole process of reclaiming the policy space from overt intrusion by donors is also engendering greater self-confidence. These elements provide opportunities for researchers to organize and influence the policy process proactively, including the S&T policy platform of NEPAD. These plans, which are put together mostly by economists, acknowledge S&T peripherally and assume, erroneously, in the neoclassical tradition, that you don’t need proactive government intervention or a detailed S&T plan to achieve economic and social goals. Once this gap is identified, policy makers tend to be receptive to ideas about integrating S&T issues into their development plans.

Creating the demand for S&T policy research raises a number of capacity issues, however. First, policy makers need to recognize and appreciate the role of S&T in the development process, and able to integrate technology planning into economic and social plans. Second, researchers need to be trained and organized in a manner that will enable them to use state-of-the-art knowledge, to adapt models that have worked elsewhere, and to influence policy processes. Finally, specific technological and entrepreneurial skills need to be developed using a reconstituted or new S&T infrastructure and organization that links science and technology to wealth creation, and knowledge to the productive sectors. These issues constitute the main preoccupation of institutions such as the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS). This relatively new institution has a mandate to improve the governance of science and technology for Africa’s development by supporting research, training and advocacy. Creating the demand for research will require the ATPS and other knowledge networks to create a market for ideas, to support the emergence of policy entrepreneurs, to instigate deeper reflection on the need to domesticate technology and knowledge in the context of African values and culture, and to create a cadre of African *intellectual freedom fighters* who are willing and able to use their knowledge to liberate the continent from poverty.

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