

# Think tanks' influence on education policymaking in low-income contexts

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## Question

*To what extent do think tanks/research councils influence education policymaking in low-income contexts?*

*What challenges and opportunities do think tanks/research councils face in engaging with government?*

*Include 3-5 case studies from Ghana, Kenya, Uganda and Pakistan which demonstrate engagement with policymakers and/or their effectiveness.*

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## 1. Overview

Over the last decade, donors have increasingly demanded that development and poverty reduction goals be informed by research-based evidence. As such, there has been a growing focus on developing the capacities of think tanks, research organisations, networks and policymakers whilst placing strong emphasis on value for money. As a result, the number of think tanks has grown significantly across sub-Saharan Africa and Asia in particular, though their sustainability is at risk.

Though think tanks are acknowledged as critical partners bridging research with policy formulation, one significant challenge that almost all think tanks face is measuring and demonstrating their effectiveness and influence. Whilst their engagement might be visible in public discourse, think tanks' direct impact on policy is somewhat limited. Many ideas generated by think tanks, even when adopted as government policy, are rarely credited as such. Even in instances where think tanks' ideas seem to have influenced policy change or processes, the timing of such decisions by policymakers often suggests that larger political forces are driving the agenda.

In addition to measuring impact, think tanks face a number of challenges which impinge on their operational and organisational capacity and therefore their ability to engage and influence policymakers and other end users of their outputs such as the general public. These challenges include: financing, autonomy and integrity, changes in political and economic environments, relevance, staff capacity, quality and overall sustainability.

Notwithstanding, there are a number of potential opportunities for think tanks to increase their efficacy. These include: exploring alternative funding routes, co-creation and genuine partnership with government and other end users of their research/policy outputs, establishing regional/continental think tank networks, making research accessible using technology and other means, creating strategic plans, designing a creative and proactive research agenda, developing a pipeline for early career researchers and collaboration with universities and other research institutions to strengthen influence.

There is great interest in collaboration between universities and think tanks and when collaborating under mutually beneficial terms, partnership has resulted in strong engagement with decision makers. This interest in collaboration is not only among the institutions themselves but extends to the individuals working in them as well as the organisations that use and fund policy research, training, policy dialogue and consultancy. Potentially useful synergies between both types of institutions include improved quality of research outputs and training, networking, increased visibility, financial gains and capacity building.

Whilst this literature review prioritised the identification of academic literature it has primarily drawn from think pieces, blogs and other grey literature. Any reading of this review should acknowledge the limited evidence base and paucity of academic papers and rigorous literature on this subject. Self-published documents and/or excerpts on websites tend to be the main source of information describing think tank impact in education rather than independent sources which accounts for the wide variety in quality of the case studies found. Consequently, two relevant education case studies from the selected countries are presented. This has been approved by the requester. Expert comments have also been useful in conducting this review. The geographical focus of the literature presented focuses on sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and South Asia.

## 2. Context

### Definitions

Though contested, think tanks can be broadly defined as “non-governmental institutions; intellectually, organizationally and financially autonomous from government, political parties or organized interests; and set up with the aim of influencing policy” (Jakovleski, 2016). This definition however assumes extensive autonomy amongst think tanks, but in reality the distinction between think tanks, government, business and/or academia can be somewhat ambiguous. There are a range of different types of think tanks:

Table 1: Types of think tanks

Category	Definition
<b>Autonomous</b>	Significant independence from any one interest group or donor and autonomous in its operation and funding from government
<b>Quasi-independent</b>	Autonomous from government but controlled by an interest group, donor, or contracting agency that provides a majority of the funding and has significant influence over operations of the think tank.
<b>Government affiliated</b>	A part of the formal structure of government.
<b>Quasi-governmental</b>	Funded exclusively by government grants and contracts but not a part of the formal structure of government.
<b>University affiliated</b>	A policy research centre at a university.
<b>Political party affiliated</b>	Formally affiliated with a political party.
<b>Corporate (for profit)</b>	A for-profit public policy research organisation, affiliated with a corporation or merely operating on a for-profit basis

Source: McGann (2018:12)

Despite the variations, at the very least, the primary purpose of think tanks is to generate research, ideas, debate and advocate on matters of public policy. In that regard, they are both research institutions and conveners, bringing together different viewpoints and facilitating an exchange of views to create impact.

### Background

Previously, increased international and domestic education financing has not translated into better outcomes as funds are said to have been channelled into reform initiatives that were often informed by “ideology and preconceived biases rather than rigorous evidence of what works and what doesn’t” (Chun, 2016). In response, recent thinking has reemphasised the importance of

providing research-based evidence for policymakers, as illustrated in the 2005 Millennium Development Goal (MDG) task force report *'Innovation: Applying Knowledge in Development'* (Young et al, 2013). As a result, over the last decade, donors have increasingly demanded that development and poverty reduction goals be informed by research-based evidence. As such, there has been a growing focus on developing the capacities of think tanks, research organisations, networks, policy-makers and donors to generate such evidence and improve policymaking processes whilst placing strong emphasis on value for money (Chun, 2016; World Bank, 2015; Young et al, 2013; Kimenyi & Datta, 2011; Mendizabal et al, 2011).

The global education space in low-income contexts has experienced a proliferation of think tanks. Through a preliminary global mapping exercise, Jakovleski (2016) identified 133 organisations that undertake research and advocacy with the objective to directly or indirectly shape education policy. Below are the breakdowns of the think tanks by region and organisational type<sup>1</sup>.

Table 2: Education think tanks by region

Region	Percentage
USA	39%
Europe	24%
South America	15%
Africa	14%
Asia	8%

Source: Jakovleski (2016)

Table 3: Education think tanks by type

Think tank organisational type	Percentage
Independent	71%
University affiliated	16%
Government affiliated	9%
Corporate	4%

Source: Jakovleski (2016)

<sup>1</sup> See McGann (2018) for a more comprehensive global breakdown of think tanks globally but not specific to education.

## Think tanks in Africa and South Asia

According to McGann (2018: 11) there has been a worldwide decline in the number of think tanks established worldwide. Reasons for this include:

- Political and regulatory environments growing hostile to think tanks and NGOs in many countries;
- Decreasing funding for policy research by public and private donors;
- Public and private donors' tendency toward short-term, project-specific funding instead of investing in ideas and institutions;
- Underdeveloped institutional capacity and the inability to adapt to change;
- Increased competition from advocacy organisations, for-profit consulting firms, law firms, and 24/7 electronic media;
- Institutions having served their purpose and discontinued their operations.

On the other hand, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and most parts of Asia continue to see an expansion in the number and type of think tanks established. Asia in particular has experienced strong growth in its number of think tanks since the mid-2000s with China, India and some other East Asian countries dominating in terms of number. With regards to funding however, the majority of think tanks in these regions continue to be largely dependent on government funding as well as donations, grants, and contracts from international public and private donors. In order to begin diversifying their funding base, some think tanks are said to have targeted businesses and wealthy individuals to support their core operations and programmes (McGann, 2018; Ravichander, 2018). Overall, university, government affiliated, or funded think tanks remain the dominant model for think tanks in Asia and SSA with the majority of independent think tanks based in the US and Europe (see also, Jakovleski, 2016). There is reported to be increasing diversity among think tank organisational types in SSA and Asia with independent, political party affiliated, and corporate/business sector think tanks being established with greater frequency (McGann, 2018)

African think tanks are said to be under serious threat and this has been highlighted as a pressing issue (McGann, 2017). Some authors argue that "Africa has few vibrant think tanks. African governments don't tend to value them and in-country donors don't tend to fund them. This means the majority of African think tanks do not influence national and the global policy making." (Mugambe, 2013)

Jalal Abdel-Latif, Head of Governance and Human Security at the UN Economic Commission for Africa was quoted to have said: "Some [think tanks] have direct lines to decision-makers, but others must fight to get heard by unresponsive, and often distrustful, politicians. Simply coming up with well-researched proposals is not enough." He continues by stating: "I'm not convinced that African governments are driven by evidence-based policy research." (Wan, 2018)

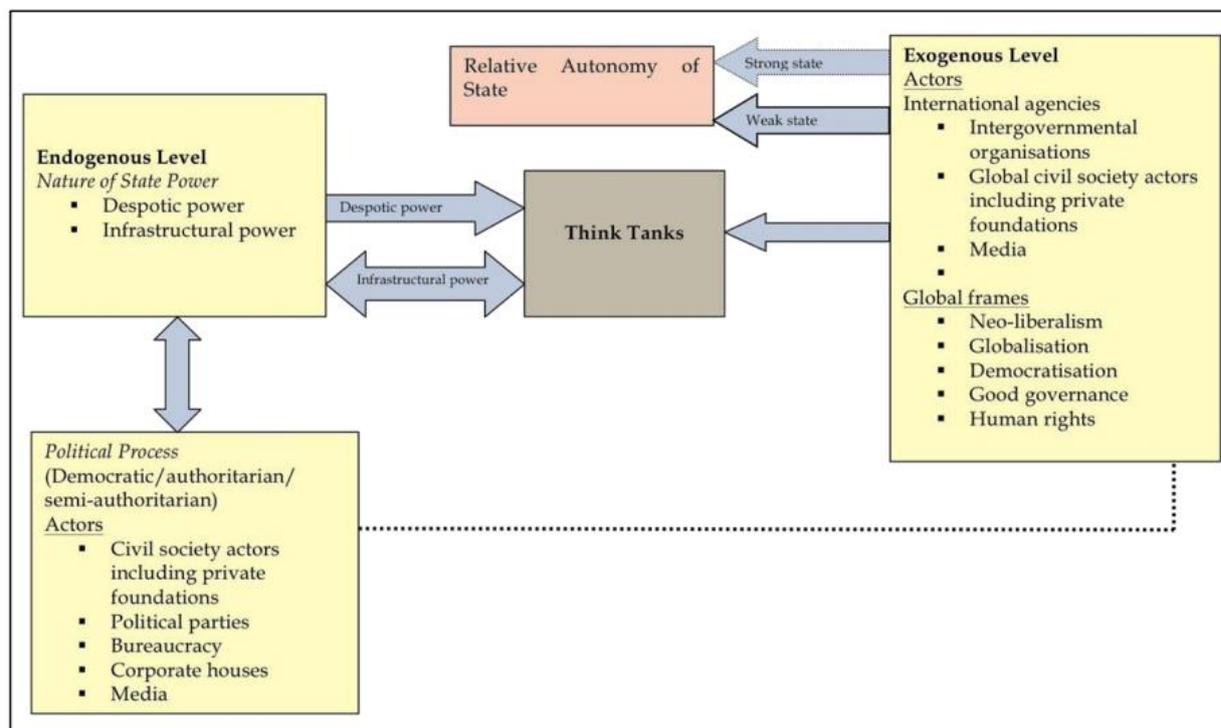
During the first Africa Think Tank Summit convened in 2014 in South Africa, Dr. Frannie Leautier, the then Executive Secretary of the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF), reported that "30 percent of Africa's think tanks may close or be in serious crisis" (McGann, 2018, McGann et al, 2017). McGann has also suggested that based on his research and evaluation of Africa's think tanks, that a further 25-30 percent are fragile or failing (McGann, 2018). Reasons for this include African think tanks' comparatively small teams and budgets due to insufficient and irregular funding, high staff turnover due to low salaries, and financial instability. These factors

contribute to widespread institutional fragility and an critical sustainability crisis in the region despite African think tanks' potential as important thought partners with deep understanding of local contextual issues providing a deep nuanced Africa perspective (see also Gandolfo & Taddese, 2018).

The literature review found that the overall picture on Asian (particularly South Asian) think tanks is limited and mixed. Some authors state that Asian think tanks may enjoy prominence in policy discourse but have limited influence and few tangible outcomes of their activities (Rashid, 2012). Other authors suggest that think tanks in South Asia have matured and grown to become strong influencers e.g. Social Policy and Development Centre (SDPC) in Pakistan. Some think tanks are geared towards addressing issues relating to public policy and others have joined movements which support grassroot-level activities whilst others have emerged as leaders in their domain, seen as experts within government bodies such as Social Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan (Ravichander, 2018).

Srivastava (2011) argues that at the endogenous level, think tanks in South Asia are continuously navigating complex political processes, in which political parties, bureaucracy, private foundations, corporations, the media and other competing societal and individual/civil society actors encroach on the level of autonomy in think tanks' operational environment. At the exogenous level, international agencies and global frameworks have an important influence on the nature and functioning of think tanks. This influence varies across different South Asian countries. The "smaller and weaker states" have less scope in terms of resource and expertise. In this instance, international organisations both public and private have a greater role in defining think tanks' activities and the parameters in which they work. Srivastava concludes that think tanks as a "knowledge industry" in South Asia are largely structured by the state with undercurrents of global paradigms, and thus function within the framework of "two-level embedded autonomy" (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Knowledge–power interface in South Asia: the two-level embedded autonomy framework



Source: Srivastava (2011: 6)

## Impact and effectiveness

According to a number of authors, (see Lucas, 2017; Jaishankar, 2016; Young et al, 2013; Rashid, 2012; Srivastava, 2011) one significant challenge that almost all think tanks face it is measuring and demonstrating their effectiveness and influence. Whilst engagement might be visible in public discourse through policy debates and advocating policy proposals and/or changes, think tanks' direct impact on policy is somewhat limited. Furthermore, many ideas generated by think tanks, even when adopted as government policy, are rarely credited as such. Jaishankar (2016) in particular, highlights that in India, some of the most effective work done by think tanks "in the form of private briefings and inputs to government policy makers—is often, by necessity, not publicly acknowledged".

Expert comments for this helpdesk built on this and suggested that though think tanks may be engaging with government through initiatives, workshops, events and other modalities, the timing of the decisions made by government suggests that they were driven by larger political forces and not only the work of the think tanks. More established organisations may have arguably had a little more influence on government decisions, though it is not clear that those effects are or have been long lasting.

Lucas (2017) describes measuring think tanks effectiveness in numbers i.e. number of papers published, conferences attended and dissemination plans as a narrow form of measuring impact and suggests six ways in which think tanks can overcome this challenge:

- **Identify opportunities in the future** – Think tanks should consider what the most prominent opportunities are that can be leveraged to raise attention for the policy issues

at the core of the think tank's focus. This could be an election, a global summit, high-profile national or regional events and so on. The products that would be the most appropriate to make use of such opportunities – blogs, working groups, working papers, seminars etc. is also a key consideration.

- **Show how you are positioned** – Think tanks should proactively build and sustain strong relationships and networks across the sector in which they work. Think tanks should show a sophisticated understanding of the landscape and engage critically and early. They should also describe the level of engagement they are involved in and which policy spaces they frequent.
- **Develop a creative research agenda and explain how you do it** – Think tanks should not only focus on descriptions of current issues but look forward and assess what other emerging issues there are on the horizon and provide strong analysis and recommendations to target these emerging issues.
- **Be smart about partnerships** – This revolves around thinking about which partnerships will help a think tank to reach the audiences that matter most for their issues and what they want to achieve.
- **Consider signature work** - Lucas suggests that branding an idea or body of work e.g. working paper series, allows it to permeate policy spaces more effectively. An example is the African Center for Economic Transformation's (ACET) Africa Transformation Report<sup>2</sup>. To be powerful, there should not be a proliferation of these products so careful selection with considerations about current and future opportunities, positioning, research agenda and partnerships is crucial.
- **Reflect often and openly** – Policy spaces are complex with many competing priorities and conflicts. Lucas suggests that think tanks openly discuss these different conflicts and/or priorities and why they think it is happening. Think tanks should also consider what is getting lost in translation from research to policy i.e. are there big ideas resonating with relevant stakeholders but not being implemented well? Think tanks should show that they have a pulse on where their ideas are going, barriers and how they flexibly respond to address these challenges.

### 3. Challenges

There are a range of challenges that impede the effectiveness and sustainability of African and South Asian think tanks beyond measuring impact. This affects their ability to undertake high quality research, effectively engage with government and other stakeholders and advocate for more effective policies. Prominent issues are highlighted below:

- **Funding** - Lack of regular funding is the most critical factor impinging on the autonomy of think tanks in both South Asia and SSA. Though some have been able to generate their own revenue, such instances are few and far between. The majority are vulnerable to a donor-led research agenda. The perennial search for a constant source of funding leaves many think tanks with little space to pursue long-term planning, creative research, as most available sources of funds support short-term research aimed at an instant “impact factor” (Ravichander, 2018; McGann, 2017; Rashid, 2012; Srivastava, 2011). Where

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<sup>2</sup> [https://agbiz.co.za/uploads/AgbizNews16/160324\\_ATR2ConcepNoteMarch2016.pdf](https://agbiz.co.za/uploads/AgbizNews16/160324_ATR2ConcepNoteMarch2016.pdf)

think tanks are supported by external/donor funds, e.g. five think tanks in South Africa supported by the Swiss development agency, SIDA, core funding has enabled think tanks to set their own agendas and to choose themes and modalities that are appropriate for their organisation and their target groups (Christopolos et al, 2015: 5). Christopolos et al (2015) also highlighted that if think tanks are able to generate their own funds independent of government/international donors they would be able to engage in critical work without fear of reprimand. McGann (2017) suggests a more pragmatic approach where think tanks and donors develop a relationship with 'mutual benefits' and could support the advancement of both parties' goals and a shared agenda. The concern around funding is particularly pressing due to its direct impact on staff capacity, quality, long-term planning, autonomy and sustainability which all affect government engagement.

- **Autonomy and integrity** – The source of think tank funding often raises questions around its true autonomy, issues with bias or their work being driven by external agendas (McGann et al, 2017). For example, the perception of the African Union's (AU) position on international funding for think tanks from the perspective of African think tank directors is that – “An African think tank is not 'African' if it receives more than 10% of funding from international sources.” (McGann, 2017). Funding from private donors and high net worth individuals also raises the issue of transparency and personal agenda driving think tank work. As a result, local and international funding often creates conflict that limit the effectiveness of African think tanks at the domestic and regional level.
- **Changes in political and economic environments** - These changes by extension shift policy priorities and affect the research agenda and level of influence a think tank can have in any given period (Ravichander, 2018).
- **Relevance** - Think tanks are said to use more traditional forms of engagement with relevant stakeholders as well as the general public. Rather than employing a reactive approach to issues, think tanks are tasked with not only providing descriptive accounts of current issues but analytical research on emerging issues and disseminating that information in diverse and engaging ways making use of social media and other technology (though technological barriers can also be a deterrent to this). Determining and engaging the appropriate audience and ensuring think tank outputs cater for different groups with different interests is also crucial (Wan, 2018; Jaishankar, 2016; Mendizabal et al, 2011; expert comments).
- **Staff capacity** – Due to the nature of funding for many think tanks, they are limited in terms of their capacity to hire and retain high quality staff as well as developing a pipeline of early career researchers to enhance its long-term sustainability. In addition to this, many think tank employees have a multifaceted role - researcher, manager, communicator and sourcing staff with a broad skill set is often a challenge. Lastly, there are inequalities and power dynamics amongst researchers themselves due to age, gender etc (Ravichander, 2018; Expert comments).
- **Quality** – In light of the issues above, research and other outputs may have questionable quality in terms of methodology, quality of writing and ensuring it is fit for purpose.
- **Impact is very difficult to measure** – In order to secure funding whether domestic or international as well as to enhance their profile, think tanks have to demonstrate tangible outcomes from their activities which is often challenging to do, particularly when bidding for project-funding which has a short-term evaluation process and tends to focus on quick wins when in reality navigating and influencing the policy process can take much longer.

(Gandolfo & Taddese, 2018; Lucas, 2017; Jaishankar, 2016; Young et al, 2013; Rashid, 2012; Srivastava, 2011)

## 4. Opportunities

The following areas have been highlighted as areas of opportunity for think tanks across SSA and South Asia to enhance their activities, engagement with government and other stakeholders and contribution to policymaking.

- **Funding** – In addition to income generation and sourcing funding from the private sector, working in consortiums has been one way to address the issue of irregular funding/funding that goes beyond the typical donor cycle (Ravichander, 2018).
- **Co-creation and genuine partnership** - True and close partnership between government officials and researchers should be encouraged throughout the research process (when designing the research focus, methods etc.), and not just through dissemination at the end. This should extend to a broad variety of stakeholders including experts from other think tanks. This increases the chance of buy-in and collaborative change (Expert comments). One example is the Evidence Day, a joint venture with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), the Ghanaian Ministry of Education, UNICEF and USAID which brings together a multitude of education partners, academics, practitioners and researchers to present evidence-informed approaches to education policy and practice during the national Education Week.
- **Making research accessible** – Policymakers need reliable, accessible, and useful information about the systems and countries they govern. They also need to know how current policies are working/not working, as well as to set out possible alternatives and their estimated costs and consequences. The use of social media and other innovative forms of communication are key to engage policymakers as well as the general public in research or policy product debates. This should be coupled with strong relationship building with key bodies and institutions to enhance this further (Wan, 2018; Ravichander, 2018; McGann, 2018; Gandolfo & Taddese, 2018; Mugambe, 2013).
- **Expanding the research agenda** – One expert speaking on the Ghanaian context commented that there is a lot of current research being done by Ghanaian institutions focusing on micro issues in the classroom (pedagogy in particular), and that there are only few Ghanaian-based academics looking at system-level issues and questions - e.g. questions of accountability, monitoring, management practices. Likewise, other authors have raised that there are not enough analytical pieces on system level, regional or emerging issues addressed in the think tank research agendas and this would increase their relevance (Wan, 2018; Lucas, 2017).
- **Building networks (sector based, geographical etc)** – Continental networks such as the West African Think Tank Network (WATTNet) present opportunities to facilitate peer reviews of research/policy outputs, visiting Fellows, peer mentoring and exchange, joint outputs e.g. blog series which in turn increases credibility and fortifies the members of the network to address regional and continental issues collectively. Other examples include the Asian Development Bank's *Asia Think Tank Network* and the 'Southern Voice on Post-MDGs' project, which has attracted considerable global attention. (Gandolfo & Taddese, 2018)

- **Creation of strategic plans** – During the African Think Tanks' Sustainability Forum in 2017, African think tank leaders along with their international counterparts created strategic plans and recommendations. This ranged from practical daily actions such as ensuring websites are up-to-date and functioning, to more overarching strategic decisions such as working to bring in a pipeline of the next generation of think tank researchers. In addition, the forum recommended that think tanks focus heavily on evidence and data, with the suggestion of translating work into both French and English to help increase collaboration, readership and influence across the African continent (McGann, 2018).
- **Alternative pipelines for early career researchers** – Example of strategies include providing online training for early career researchers or creating a platform for 'travelling scholars/Fellows' who may travel abroad for further studies for example but can still contribute to think tank activities and capacity building (Gandolfo & Taddese, 2018).
- **Collaboration with universities** – This could include working with university staff and encouraging university students to engage with think tank research in preparation for them to potentially collaborate or work for them after graduation (Kaija, 2015).

## Think tanks and universities

Universities have traditionally been seen as the key generators of research in many countries however a shift is occurring. Currently, the institutional landscape for research and knowledge production in is becoming more varied as different types of institutions join the field (Taylor, 2017; Kaija, 2015). A series of studies examining the relationship between think tanks and universities across SSA, South Asia and Latin America by the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) highlighted the strong practical orientation and policy focus of think tanks, and the more theoretical emphasis of many university researchers. The studies also confirmed that researchers from think tanks and universities often work together as they have a shared interest in quality research which has the potential to influence policy making for societal impact.

Think tank researchers were reported to appreciate the status that comes from working with their colleagues in universities. Similarly, university researchers appreciated the flexible conditions related to working with their colleagues in think tanks, as it helped them avoid the typically heavy bureaucracy of universities that makes it challenging to quickly undertake time-sensitive research.

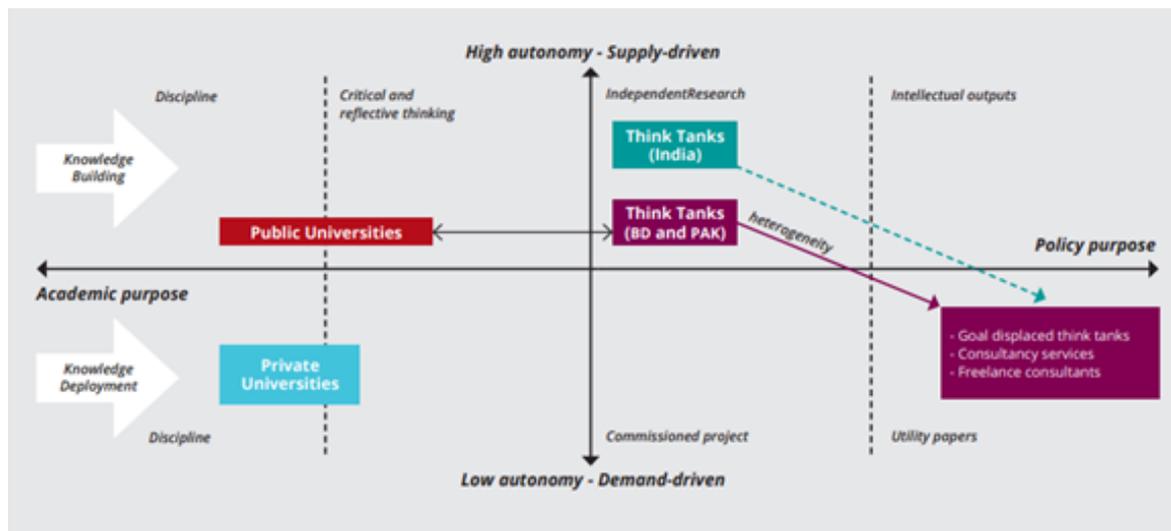
Whilst undoubtedly there is competition between the two bodies, when both collaborate, they are able to achieve more and gain the attention of decision makers more effectively than they would if working separately (Taylor, 2017). Likewise, universities and think tanks bring diverse but complementary skills and resources and would benefit from harnessing their comparative advantages in a mutually enforcing agenda that recognises clear roles for each institution or individual (Taylor, 2017; Kaija, 2015).

Myles (2014) presents two conceptual frameworks used to analyse the relationships between think tanks and universities in South Asia and SSA.<sup>3</sup>

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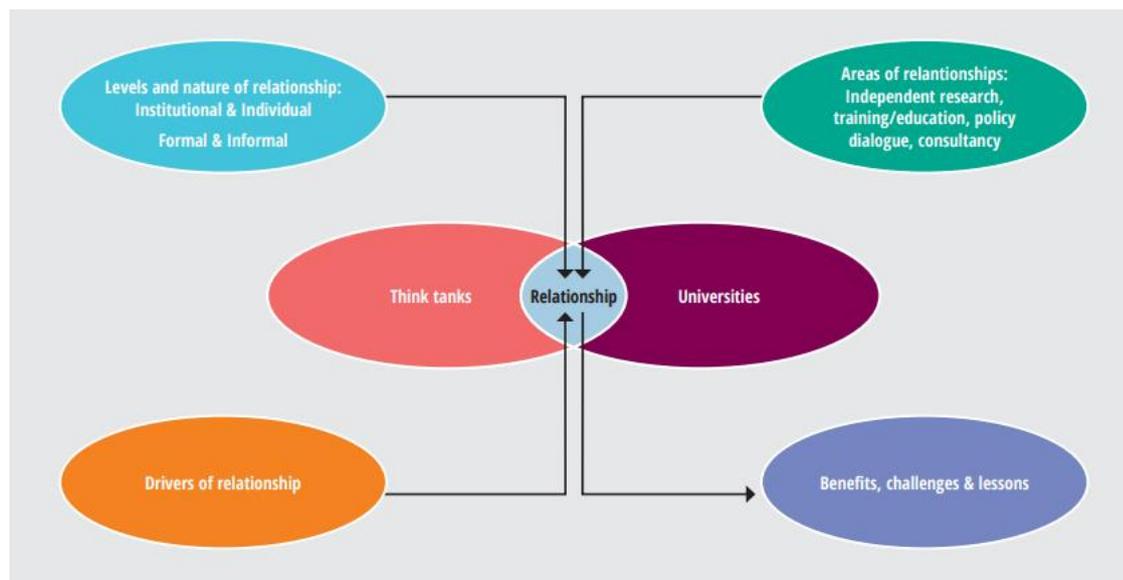
<sup>3</sup> More details can be found in Myles (2014: 11)

Figure 2: Revised conceptual framework (think tanks and universities in South Asia)



Source: Myles (2014: 25)

Figure 3: A framework for university-think tank relationships in Sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Myles (2014: 20)

Myles (2014) highlights that when universities' and think tanks' objectives are in alignment, and they enter into cooperative or complementary relationships, these collaborations often take the form of informal relationships between individuals, though they may also represent more formalised relationships between institutions. Kaija's (2015) 10 country study across SSA found that motivations for collaboration by individuals range from the pursuit of individual interests (job prospects, earning, experience and/or status) to the desire to increase efficacy in research, dissemination and policy. As such, the lines between formal and informal relationships are often blurred however personal relationships were shown to be a prerequisite for institutional trust.

Kaija (2015) also states that across the 10 countries studied, there is great interest in collaboration between universities and think tanks. This interest in collaboration is not only among the institutions themselves but extends to the individuals working in them as well as the organisations that use and fund policy research, training, policy dialogue and consultancy. Potentially useful synergies between both types of institutions include improved quality of research outputs and training, networking, increased visibility, financial gains, and capacity building. Collaborations between universities and think tanks were highlighted as sustainable when those involved have common and clear goals.

The desire by think tanks and universities to influence the research agenda in their own favour can derail collaborative opportunities due to the “knowledge generation-policy influence nexus” (Kaija, 2015). Generally, university staff in SSA see research and publication as key activity, not for policy influence per se, but as an avenue for promotion as this is often the basis for career progression. Think tanks on the other hand generally see informing policy as more important. Reaching a balance between knowledge generation and policy influence is a challenge that can affect potential collaboration. To address this, universities and think tanks need sound communication strategies, transparency and good leadership to mutually benefit each other and a common goal.

There are mixed responses across the countries assessed, on the role donors play in supporting or facilitating think tank-university relations with some reporting that only a handful of donors make collaboration a pre-condition for funding (Kaija, 2015). In light of the fact that collaboration is dependent on stable funding, recommendations were made for donors to include think tank-university collaboration in their call-for-proposals, funding streams as well as facilitating meeting opportunities for universities and think tanks.

Additional recommendations include the need to support the technical exchange of information through journals which publish research evidence from both think tanks and universities. Furthermore, donors in a range of contexts can convene meetings that will help think tanks and universities to explore the different forms of research and engage on consensus building on how to integrate policy and research.

## 5. Case studies

### Quality Preschool for Ghana (QP4G) project, IPA Ghana<sup>4</sup>

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) is a research and policy non-profit that researches and promotes effective solutions to global poverty issues. IPA brings together researchers and decision-makers to design, rigorously evaluate, and refine these solutions and their applications, ensuring that the evidence created is used to improve the lives of the world’s poor. The organisation works across 51 countries globally, of which Ghana is one.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> IPA (2018) Quality Preschool for Ghana: Engagement Case Study.

<sup>5</sup> Find out more about IPA here: <https://www.poverty-action.org/>

## **Initial Engagement**

The QP4G research launched in 2015 with the aim of developing, testing and scaling-up supply- and demand-side interventions to improve Kindergarten (KG) educational quality in Ghana. IPA leveraged existing relationships (of over a decade) and expertise in the Ghanaian context to survey the educational landscape and scope. This was followed by conversations with decision makers in the Ministry and its operational arm, the Ghana Education Service (GES) to align research goals with policy needs and priorities which were identified as teacher training and finding cost effective solutions.

With scale up in mind, the research team partnered with the National Nursery Teacher Training Center (NNTTC), a body well regarded by Ghanaian education experts and one with potential systemic reach (though their services were underutilised at the time). Research tools were also designed through participatory methods bringing together local and international expertise.

## **Engagement during the research process**

The various elements of the programme were co-designed with a variety of national stakeholders in government, the NGO space, academia, private education providers and the wider development sector designed to promote shared ownership of the programme. In order to maintain interest and ownership, a steering committee was established to regularly update and brief relevant partners and make changes to the programme's approach where necessary.

## **Engagement after the research process**

Dissemination of results included using various opportunities to share findings at different national events organised by IPA or other large donor funded projects working at a national scale and related to the potential scale up of QP4G e.g. Transforming Teacher Education and Learning's (T-TEL) conference.

## **Results**

- With IPA's support, NNTTC is in the process of incorporating the QP4G training as part of their usual offering, to enable more KG teachers access to an effective, low-cost KG teacher training. IPA also continues to help NNTTC strategies and engage private school institutions.
- The Teacher Education Division of GES invited IPA to collaborate on developing an ECE framework that provides a policy direction on how Ghana's early education teachers should be trained.
- IPA has been asked to provide input into the new Ghana Education Sector Plan and will directly inform upcoming GPE and IDA funding for the Ghana Education Sector
- IPA has been invited to be the "evidence partner" in the ambitious process of revision of the National Kindergarten Quality Improvement plan (2018-2030)

Particular areas of strength highlighted in IPA's approach to engaging policymakers include:

- Embedded co-creation as a core part of the organisation's policy engagement strategy
- Intentional engagement of policymakers throughout the life-cycle of the research project and beyond

- Working with a team of researchers who go beyond undertaking research tasks but consider the most effective way to engage decision makers as well as research relevance to different groups e.g. educators
- Partnering with funders who value engagement and are prepared to build this into project budgets

## **Aga Khan University – institute for Educational Development, Pakistan<sup>6</sup>**

Naveed & Suleri (n.d.) highlight the Aga Khan University's (AKU) Institute for Education Development (IED) as a strong example of a university affiliated think tank contributing to the national education agenda in Pakistan. With a track record of 25 years convening educational courses and programmes, commissioning research, designing and implementing small and large-scale projects (in Pakistan and Afghanistan), running schools across various parts of the country and remaining at the forefront of educational policy debates, AKU has solidified its influence and visibility as a key policy and research thought leader in Pakistan. AKU is credited with contributing to the National Education Policy (2009), the national teacher professional development framework, as well as textbook development, curriculum reform and education planning in the province of Sindh. In terms of research outputs, AKU's IED is said to have produced the largest amount of education research in the past decade. This is particularly striking as the overall engagement of universities in policy research in Pakistan remains scant (p. 44).

Naveed & Suleri (n.d.) highlight that unlike higher education institutions, the working hours of the faculty members at the AKU-IED are equally distributed between teaching and research thus allowing them the opportunity to embark on time-sensitive research to engage with policy. The Research and Policy Studies Initiative of the IED is focused on strengthening the capacity of the institute to engage with policy research and disseminate research at a wider level through conferences, seminars and formal and informal dialogues with policymakers.

Naveed & Suleri (n.d.) state that IED are able to overcome significant funding challenges by receiving funds from the wider university and proactively seeking international collaborations with universities and acclaimed research institutions such as the British Council, European Commission, Global Affairs Canada, World Bank, Norwegian Agency for Development and DFID, to name a few. High standards of grant management and transparency in research funds as well as the development of the appropriate procedures support this process. IED has also created partnerships with international universities such as Oxford University; Institute of Education, University of London; Centre for Global Citizenship Education and Research; and the Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta. It is noted however that there is a lack of partnership with other local universities and think tanks.

Particular strengths of IED as active providers of policy research include (p. 44-45):

- Financial sustainability through access to internal resources and capacity building to tap external resources;

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<sup>6</sup> Naveed, A. & Suleri, A.Q. & Naveed (n.d.) Making 'Impact Factor' Impactful: Universities, Think Tanks and Policy Research in Pakistan. Islamabad: Sustainable Development Policy Institute.

- A strong tradition of research at the university;
- Institutional arrangements to encourage faculty members to conduct policy research in addition to teaching;
- An appreciation of the importance of engaging with policies and practical interventions as well as dissemination and communication of research findings at the wider level;
- Openness to collaborate with external partners and the capacity to sustain such collaborations;
- The university's reputation of being non-partisan and free from political interference.

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## Key websites

- Harvard Kennedy School Think Tank Mapping:  
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- Think Tank Initiative: <http://www.thinktankinitiative.org/>
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<https://www.gotothinktank.com/>

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## About this report

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