CHAPTER 12

Conclusion: Towards Excellence in Research, Learning and Teaching Public Policy

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of research to effective and result-oriented policy making in Africa has long been recognised. In many countries of Africa, one of the hallmarks of the march towards independence was the establishment of think tanks and research institutes for promoting evidence-informed policy making. Laakso (2022: 25) identified the Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research and the Makerere Institute for Social Research as epitomising the government intervention to promote development and policy research in the 1950s. Furthermore, by the early 1960s, several universities went on to establish their own institute to conduct policy-oriented research to support the development initiatives of African governments. In some countries the institutes earlier established by the colonial authorities as colleges for training of public servants were...

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upgraded while in others new institutes were established by the government. These institutes were particularly active on the continent during the heydays of central planning.

However, as governments increasingly focused on consolidating power to extract economic gains, they became more repressive and intolerant of criticism. Criticism of policy was taken as a challenge to the rule of leaders who had increasingly became dictatorial. The relationship between the government and the intellectual community soured and intellectual freedom became constrained. Thus, despite the initial efforts to develop institutions to provide evidence for policy, African governments struggled to generate accurate data for governance until crisis of the 1980s that led to the introduction of structural adjustment programmes.

Under structural adjustment in the 1990s, governments faced severe fiscal pressures and slashed funds to university research centres constraining their ability to undertake independent research. Worse still, the entire tertiary education systems were ruined by ‘brain drain’. The combined result was the reduction in the quality of policy making for future generations. During the same period, some university professors returned to the policy fold by setting up their own (donor-funded) research centres, such as the Development Policy Centre in Nigeria, the Economic and Social Research Foundation in Tanzania and the Centre for Policy Studies in South Africa (Kimenyi and Datta 2011).

The structural adjustment programme therefore marked the increasing role of the Bretton Woods Institution, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and donor agencies attached to governments of the West, such as the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) and Germany’s German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) in sub-Saharan Africa. Also, during the period, as Mkandawire noted (2000), African intellectuals, being largely under-utilised by their governments, turned to civil society, mostly foreign-funded non-governmental research institutes for policy research. Indeed, the situation was such that some African governments had to access the research of their own intellectuals indirectly through donor-commissioned reports.

The political liberalisation and governance reforms of the 2000s saw many of government’s functions, including research, transferred to non-state actors leading to the proliferation of independent think tanks. In the last decades working with donors, these think tanks have rekindled the consciousness of the need for evidence-informed policy making across the continent. Under the liberalised environment, politicians have had to respond to their constituencies, and the demands of political competition
by pressing for more effectiveness in policy making. The renewed interest in issues of accountability and inclusivity in policy making has led to the call for more participatory policy processes at the continental, regional and national levels to improve coordination, mutual learning and the adoption of best practices. Hence the increasing investment of African governments in policy evaluation. Evaluation is central to evidence generation and use and for infusing evidence into the policy making process. These in turn can increase politicians’ incentives to select the most efficient policies and to address the capacity gaps in policy learning (Ball 1995). As Aiyede and Quadri (2022) noted, policy evaluation on a national scale is beginning to take root in many countries in Africa.

Furthermore, like the rest of the world, the Covid-19 pandemic and the interventions to stem its spread and overcome it has had consequences for life and welfare and for policy making in Africa. The border closures and movement restrictions imposed by governments to curb the spread of the virus disrupted social and economic life, affecting the livelihoods and well-being of hundreds of millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa. The production of relevant healthcare materials such as nose masks, ventilators, vaccine, etc., and social engineering required to address the pandemic rekindled economic nationalism and reinforced global inequality and inequities across the world. It created a new vision of policy making that emphasised the need to build national capabilities in policy making and state intervention to address welfare in an uncertain and risky environment of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In sum, the experience of Covid-19 clearly showed the centrality of national research capability for evidence-informed policy making to address public problems which have grown in scale, complexity and urgency. The context of policy making has become increasingly uncertain, characterised by rapid and widespread changes. Expert knowledge in the form of evidence that can inform policy making is increasingly sought and utilised in the policy process to achieve sustainable development.

The chapters in this book are written to provide ideas for reflection in the effort to empower a generation of scholars in policy analysis who will take on the task of generating new evidence and analyses needed to highlight the critical political, economic, social, institutional and technical factors that can enable or constrain the ability of African societies to meet mounting developmental challenges relating to poverty reduction, infrastructural development, education and healthcare provision, food security; and for mitigating climate change and its consequences, to achieve effective governance and sustainable development more broadly.
The chapters in this book are put together to support graduate programmes at the masters and doctoral levels in public policy across Africa. They constitute a useful contribution to addressing the need for scholarly research that empowers public policy practitioners to make informed decisions, an effort by the Partnership for Africa Social and Governance Research (PASGR) to produce a generation of educators, researchers and practitioners in public policy. These chapters are a resource for teaching and learning in schools of public policy and in multiple disciplinary departments. They provide ingredients for training in policy-focused research and underscore the need to draw on a wide range of perspectives, disciplines and approaches in public policy teaching and learning.

REFERENCES


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