ACADEMIA | Letters

Research-Based Policy in Africa

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Introduction and Rationale of the Study

Globally, the use of research in formulating policy, gained traction just after World War II and became a standard of best practice for governmental and non-governmental organisations towards the end of the 20th century (Bailey, 2010). Consequently, nations of the Global North are striving to use evidence-based policies in advancing their development agenda. Examples of such countries include, the Netherlands, USA, the United Kingdom, etc.

However, this is not common practice in Africa and there is a great lacuna between research and policy. Existing literature reveals that there is limited work on the relationship between knowledge production and development in Africa (Bailey, 2010). Not only does most research exist in seeming isolation, but there is also a lack of institutional support and enabling frameworks for knowledge to be transformed into policies and initiatives that contribute to societal advancement. A case in point is South Africa where government is a major funder of research in South Africa – especially in the public sciences (Mouton, 2006), howbeit, a study by Naude et al. (2015) revealed that research is not the main driver of policy in South Africa; rather, current contextual realities, costs, logistics, and people are the primary influences on policy. In West Africa, a similar study conducted by Olomola (2007) in Nigeria demonstrated that, even with the existence of policy-oriented research organizations in Nigeria, policy decisions do not draw from relevant research.

To have a holistic appraisal of this phenomenon in Africa and to ascertain the current state, this study aimed at reviewing the Science Granting Council (SGC), an initiative instituted by 15 African countries to drive Research and Innovation for the development of Africa. The

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study examined the research activities of the SGCs in relation to their alignment to the national priorities/ plan and the usefulness or translation of research outcomes/ knowledge production into tangible products capable of improving the wellbeing of citizens in the individual states.

Methodology

To achieve this, the study adopted a qualitative research model using a phenomenological case study approach. Primary data was collected qualitatively using key Informant Interview (KII). Informants interviewed were selected conveniently and purposively from SGCs staff and governing board in four (4) African states which are Botswana and Zambia in Southern Africa, Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa, Kenya in East Africa. These countries were selected to represent the three regions of the SGCI and a mixed sample of both independent SGCs and those located within a government department. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on three areas, namely the link between research funding and priorities to development agendas; the importance of resource sharing, and the role that valorisation of research plays in unlocking research funds and support development plans.

Research priorities, funding and development plans

In this study, there were many references to the research priorities being informed not only by national development plans but regional as well as continent wide development agendas. For instance, the Steering Committee of Programme d'Appui Stratégique à la Recherche Scientifique (PASRES) in Cote d'Ivoire V gives direction to the other two (Scientific Council and Executive Secretariat) in terms of priorities at the sub-regional level, i.e. ECOWAS and national level as well. Kenya is addressing her bigger vision 2030, the SDGs, and of course the African Union Agenda 2063. In Zambia the Council developed a 5-year strategic plan which is guided by the 7 National Development Plan (7NPP) and the Vision 2030. This 7 NPP and Vision 2030 is aimed at developing a country driven by science, technology and innovation**.** The challenge, however, is in the use of research information for policy that addresses national development.

In the three countries with independent SGCs there seems to be more coordination in setting research priorities and aligning them to the national government agenda. In Cote d'Ivoire scientific research priorities are set by the Scientific Council. For Kenya the government has set four major national objectives which are food security, universal health coverage, manufacturing, and housing, which frame the research priorities set and coordinated. In the case of Zambia, their SGC referred to as the National Science and Technology Council (NSTC)

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sets priorities and outline them in their five-year strategic plan that is informed by the government's development agenda encapsulated in the 7 National Development Plan (7NPP) and the Vision 2030. However, in Botswana, in the absence of an SGC, different ministries set their own priorities based on the national development plan and use their own funds to support research. These efforts are coordinated through the Botswana Joint Committee.

From the preceding therefore, it could be said that there is a close connection between research funding and development agendas. However, the lacuna discovered is that research outcomes are not ploughed back to support the development agendas because, most research products remain inaccessible or not in the form that can easily be used or understood by policymakers. Hence, the need for the drafting of policy briefs for the sake of new knowledge conversion into tangible products that would be beneficial to all.

Resource Sharing

There was evidence of resource sharing through joint projects across national borders to address common agendas and Africa related agendas. One such example was the joint work between Botswana and Zimbabwe, funded by a third party, in this case the NRF in South Africa. Other partnerships were between an SGC and the development agency, as was the case with PASRES and the government of Switzerland which signed a scientific cooperative agreement in 2006 and has a Switzerland representative on their Council. One of the challenges mentioned often was that there was no direct link between research and development and that policymakers are mostly interested in showing tangible outcomes of research to justify continued funding. A strategy that has been adopted in Kenya and Zambia is to establish a unit for the valorisation of research. Kenya and Zambia have a unit that valorizes research products. Currently in Botswana, there is an initiative for public engagement and information dissemination to get research to benefit the economy and the society at large.

Valorisation of research products

The SGCs are aware that the non-valorisation of research products poses a major challenge to research and innovation funding in Africa. And this corroborates existing literature vis-à-vis research funding in Africa. This is because politicians and policy makers who are at the helm of affairs and control the states resources want to see research products that would have positive impact on its citizens. When this is lacking, they are not encouraged to provide adequate funding for research purposes. Currently, there is a deficit of this which needs to be addressed by the SGCs.

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It is fundamental to note that both applied and basic research are germane to the development process. In other words, not all research would be policy oriented howbeit, they all bring about innovation in the long run. As such politicians and policy makers should be made aware of this for a better sense of judgement when it comes to funding research.

NRF South Africa, continues to be a model which many SGCs tend to adopt. This Council has an articulated plan for effective partnership with the private sector. The NRF–Industry strategy aims to focus on supporting and promoting innovative research and human capacity development programmes that involve long-term partnerships with industry and research institutions.

Botswana is starting to consider the involvement of the private sector in funding research and they attribute this realization to their participation in the SGCI and financial support received during phase one of the SGCI. One challenge raised was that most of the private sector and industry in Botswana are predominantly subsidiaries of entities elsewhere, who only offer services and products that come out from such environment. In Kenya,strong partnerships exist as the NRF currently provides funding for researchers in the private sector as well. The Big Four Priority areas, namely food security, universal health coverage, manufacturing, and housing are funded through public funds and privately raised funds are used to support other identified priorities. There are expectations to raise money from the private sector, as the sector is represented on the Board of the NRF.

In Botswana there are plans to monitor research that is externally funded in order to build a data base of that research as well as develop mechanisms that would allow for the sharing of equipment. Great progress has been made in setting up that data base and expectations were to launch the system in August 2021 however, due to the challenges faced in the implementation process, the target could not be met. The SGC therefore expects the data base to be launched before the end of 2022. And in Zambia, the Council partners with the private sector by organizing joint activities. Yearly, the Zambian Science Conference is organized and a central theme jointly developed with its partners in areas such as the agro-processing, livestock, etc.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusively, our findings have revealed the current state of research and policy nexus in Africa. Though, the SGC has been able to bridge that gap slightly, there is a need for more improvement. It is on this basis that we recommend that the research community make an effort to disseminate their research products through other non-academic platforms to benefit the broader community, communicate their findings to policymakers through policy briefs, and on the part of politicians and policymakers, they need to be aware that there is still the

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need to value basic research for possible long-term impact.

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