AFRICAN RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT*: There is an age-long relationship between research and policy development and vice versa. In recent years, research has assumed growing importance in Africa. However, this growing hunger for research has borne little policy development impact owing to lack of capacity and genuine desire to solve societal problems. Most often than not, African researchers are influenced by narrow immediate personal benefits of research without the desire to drive policy development. Similarly, most African policymakers are more mindful of acknowledging and promoting their personal interests than embracing research that benefits society. The fall out of these is the difficulty in the supply, uptake and use of quality research for policy development. This paper will discuss personal interests as the main challenge to African research and policy development and proffer suitable solutions.*

KEY WORDS*: Africa, personal interests, research evidence, policy development*

INTRODUCTION

The importance of research to policy development cannot be overemphasised. The discourse on the use of research findings for policy development has evolved over time. Early political scientist focused more on government institutions and political processes than policies but the focus has shifted to policies, their contents, description, analysis, as well as the explanations of the causes and consequences of governmental actions. (Basu, 2009) Contemporary writings on policies indicate a correlation between government actions, policies and research. In developed states, the relationship between research and policy development has assumed new heights. The crucial question within these states has changed from how do research outcomes move to the policy development sphere to why are some research ideas used to influence policy development while others are not (Court & Young, 2006) and the degree to which high quality evidence can influence policy development. (Brehaut & Juzwishin, 2005) This is not so for many African states. Many African researchers and policymakers often operate at parallel frequencies. Most often, they are concerned with their personal interests than the use of research to drive policies beneficial to the society. Apart from personal interests; poor funding, poor research quality assurance mechanism, and illiteracy – influenced by personal interests – as well as the gap in the transfer of research evidence from researchers to policymakers hinder the supply, uptake and use of research in policy development in Africa.

RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Policies are plans of action made by individuals, bodies or governments to achieve their set goals. Governmental policies are made by policymakers who may rely on research findings otherwise referred to as research evidence. In many developed states, ideology is said to have given way to pragmatism such that policies based on research findings enjoy more value than those hinged on belief. These states consider research evidence based policies more sound, objective, long term in focus and better than those not based on research. Research evidence is the evidence borne out of systematic investigations toward increasing the sum of knowledge otherwise called scientific evidence. Bertrand Russell describes scientific evidence as devoid of personal desires, tastes, and interests and as such affording the key to the understanding of the world. There is the tendency to believe that evidence is the outcome of only scientific study. However, evidence can take other forms like practice informed evidence and citizen based evidence. (Broadbent, 2012) Yet, despite other forms of evidence and variables - values, beliefs, practices, ideology, interests, etcetera - that exits and influence policy development, some writers emphasize the importance of research evidence.

For instance, Carden claims that his survey of over twenty case studies, provides hard evidence that research evidence enhances policy in developing states as his surveys show that the use of this type of evidence led to the formation of successful policies, while the failure to use such evidence led to unsuccessful policies. (Carden, 2009) Yet, this claim is arguable because it deals with counterfactuals as it is difficult to determine or explain what drives an effective policy. It has been argued, for instance, that the determinant of the rightness or wrongness of a policy is not the appropriateness of the research evidence used but its acceptance by the majority of the citizens of the state. (Brehaut & Juzwishin, 2005, p. 4) So, assuming best research evidence indicates, that women should earn more pay and benefits than men because of their better disposition to work, the policy can still be regarded as wrong and ineffective if the majority of the populace reject it. Thus, effective policies are not solely influenced by research evidence. Other forms of evidence and variables have significant impact on policies. Research might be led by beneficiaries, donors or academics for different reasons through a number of actors including university departments, research institutes and think-tanks. (Broadbent, 2012, p. 6) As there are other possible uses of research evidence, so are other forms of evidence and variables necessary for policy development. So, that policies are not based on research evidence does not necessarily mean that they are not evidence based and sound.

ROLE OF RESEARCH IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Different explanations have been given for how research evidence aids the policy development process. Howlett in his overview of the history of evidence influenced policy development, provided a synthesis of the different models of the policy development process. (Howlett, 2002) From the traditional pure rational model stand point, research evidence influence policy development directly through a number of neutral sequential stages. The model explains that policymakers are neutral technocrats who follow systematic methods for arriving at logical, linear, efficient, and effective policies to solve problems. This model advanced by Lasswell in 1956, as policy science, was soon brought into question for being overly simplistic and ignoring the political

dynamics which underlie not only what evidence gets used but also what evidence gets produced, as experience with policy development showed that it was hardly a linear affair. (Brehaut & Juzwishin, 2005, p. 6) According to Jones, this model gives the wrong impression that policy development is relatively neutral. (Jones, 2010)

In reality, policy development is incremental in nature with research potentially contributing to a gradual shift in perceptions about issues in a process of enlightenment, satisficing given the bounded rationality of policymakers which leads them to satisfy the goals they have set to achieve, fluid in nature representing an arbitrary chaos of purposes and accidents dependent on a multitude of actors in an unpredictable context, and feasible only when a policy window – problems, proposals and politics – opens. The relationship between research and policy development may also be one-way, mutually constitutive, or two autonomous spheres. (Boswell & Smith, 2018) Yet, no single model can account for all policy development processes within a state because policy processes differ according to political circumstance.

What this then means for the role of research in policy development is that there is a limit to how much research evidence can influence policy development. A number of actors and factors come together to influence the extent of the role of research in policy development. In some situations, research evidence finds little scope for influence in policy development, no matter how good the research evidence, and no matter how hard researchers try to have policies made based on them. What is important is that as much as possible, all forms of evidence – including research evidence – are put on the table and considered together with other potent variables in reaching balanced policy decisions.

RESEARCH AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

The notion that policy should be based on research evidence is not new. Apart from research geared towards solving personal problems which may in the end rub off on society, developed states like the United States have since adopted research in their policy development process. For instance, during the Second World War and the cold war, the United States adopted the strategy of funding corporate and academic research for science and technology development policies in the health and defence sectors. (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2005) In recent years, research evidence has permeated national and international development policy discourse. In 2011, the United Kingdom's Labour Party project – the evidence-based policy agenda – came to wield strong influence in the area of international development in ensuring donor policies and subsequent activities are based on research evidence of what works and supporting developing countries to improve their use of research evidence in order to achieve development objectives as encapsulated in the Millennium Development Goals - the MDGs. The approach was stimulated by greater scrutiny of the impact of donor funding in developing countries due to the 2009 recession. (Broadbent, 2012, p. 6) Similarly, in 2012, the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) organised the International Conference on Evidence Informed Policy Making (EIPM) attended by delegates from four continents including Africa. The conference was aimed at bringing together researchers who have examined the process of evidence informed policy making as well as representatives of both the academic and policy making

communities to discourse the uptake of research evidence in the policy making process as an approach and strategy for development. International donors have keyed into this practice due to their belief that an effective policy requires the testing of the facts in order to inform its design and application. (Broadbent, 2012, p. 6) The outcome is a growing international research evidence-based policy agenda built on the premise that greater use of research evidence will lead to more effective development policies. In spite of the growing international wave of research influence, there is a general agreement that the supply, uptake and use of research evidence in policy development in Africa is limited. (Uneke, 2012) and (Banda, February, 2012).

CHALLENGES TO RESEARCH SUPPLY, UPTAKE AND USE IN AFRICA

In Africa, personal interests, poor funding, poor research quality assurance mechanism, illiteracy, and the gap in the transfer of research evidence from researchers to policymakers hinder the uptake and use of research evidence in policy development.

Policymakers in many African states impose and justify self-seeking policies on the people on grounds of historical, cultural and social values, beliefs and practices which often curtail the freedom of expression. Evidence of the survival of values, beliefs and practices is deemed evidence of their legitimacy and justification for their continuity. In a Sierra Leone case study carried out by Broadbent in 2011, the recognition of the role of research evidence in the policy debates over the reform of the chieftaincy, was one-sided as a researched report which collated over 40years evidence in support of reforming the Sierra Leonean chieftaincy institution was not met with a similar researched response. The defenders of the chieftaincy, mainly chiefs and policymakers, primarily appealed to values, beliefs and practices while rejecting the report as politically motivated attacks on an African institution by foreigners armed with the western ideas of good governance and human rights. (Broadbent, 2012, p. 2) While the historical antecedents of western subjugation of most African states and the use of human rights protection as a weapon of control may justify treating the report as suspect, there still exist significant personal political incentives not to reform the chieftaincy. Given that the seats of African traditional leaders are still influential enough to sway peoples' political positions, the chiefs and policymakers push for the subsistence rather than the reformation of the Sierra Leonean chieftaincy institutions was influenced by their personal interests. While policymakers ensconce their personal interests in historical, cultural and social values, beliefs and practices, researchers concerned with their personal benefits, hinge on poor funding.

The effect of the poor funding of education and research on the use of research evidence in Africa is multifaceted. Poor funding leads to poor facilities, poor equipment, poor teaching approaches and employment of limited numbers of qualified academics in many African universities. The shortage of qualified academics leads to increased workload for the academics in a way that teaching takes priority over research. Heavy teaching load means that academics have limited time for research which in many cases translates to the dedication of less time to research. Ultimately leading to delay and reduction in the numbers of quality research and increase in poor research outputs. This situation is compounded by poor maintenance and update of research facilities, equipment and teaching approaches. The reliance on outdated research and teaching

tools and approaches, hinder research outputs and the ability of academics to instil a culture of enquiry in their students who end up in the academia and policymaking corridors where they churn out poor research and policy outputs. Many African academic researchers blame poor funding for imbibing the culture of pursuing narrow personal goals of obtaining research grants, academic credit, job promotion, and better income, which are not broad enough to spur policy development or reform. The focus on personal goals means that academics are more concerned with the numbers rather than the quality of their research leading to predatory and over recycled research outputs which offer no real solutions to societal problems. This posture has hindered the funding of African research by donors. One of the reasons for the poor funding of African research is that donors are increasingly turning their attention to funding quality research that can demonstrate direct economic, social, and cultural impacts – by way of gender equity, technology development, commercialisation, and the creation of the next generation of researchers – especially those research of national relevance geared towards solving societal problems. (Tijssen & Kraemer-Mbula, 2018, p. 398) Poor funding is responsible for the inability of many African universities to enjoy the precedent enjoyed by universities in developed states of other continents, limited competent researchers to compete or work with and the poor quality of African research outputs. This is even more so as there are no established mechanisms for scrutinising and ensuring the quality of research outputs.

In Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (the NUC) provides the standards for the appointment and promotion of University academics to assure quality education in all Nigerian universities. The appraisal of academics for appointment and promotion is based on:

- Qualification
- Teaching and or Professional Experience
- Intellectual Output and Contributions to Knowledge
- Research Impact – attraction of grants, research leadership, partnerships and patents
- Supervision of Post Graduate Students – completed and ongoing
- Active Participation in Conferences
- Administrative Experience and Civic Contributions

The above standards are replicated in the statutes and regulations of Nigerian universities nationwide. Yet, academics are more mindful of the numbers than the quality of their research. One of the reasons for this is that in practice, intellectual contributions is mainly measured by the numbers of research outputs or publications, even though the relevant regulations require quality research publications and recognises other standards like patents, prototypes, products, special medical feats and key contributions to policy. The measure of intellectual contributions or academic excellence by numbers which is similar to those of other African states does not sufficiently encourage quality research required to drive policy development.

Policy development from research evidence involves the active engagement of actors in a manner that understanding the concept of research evidence is paramount. Yet,

emerging evidence shows that research evidence literacy among African policymakers is low. In the 2012 international conference organised by INASP, the overall picture painted by the presenters is that policymakers do not have the necessary skills and knowledge to understand and use research. Similarly, in the above Sierra Leonean case, lacking the ability to use research and formulate research questions, chiefs and policymakers relied only on personalised statements of their own experience rather than a structured defence.

The gap in the transfer of research evidence from researchers to policymakers hinders evidence informed policy development. In many African states, the culture of written documentation and record keeping is still not deep rooted. Personal testimonies still enjoy great credence and legitimacy. This creates a huge problem in terms of documenting and managing research evidence, as well as institutional memory. (Broadbent, 2012, pp. 28-29) Now, research evidence is usually transferred through written mediums. Africa's lack of penchant for writing and documentation acts as a communication barrier between researchers and policymakers making the transfer, uptake and use of research by policymakers difficult.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

There is a near-unanimous agreement that research evidence based policy in Africa is something to be supported and promoted through a number of strategies. In line with the enumerated challenges of research evidence supply, uptake and use in policy development in Africa, the recommendations for change are discussed hereunder.

Personal interests have been severally identified by researchers as one of the reasons for the scarcity and difficulty in the supply, uptake and use of research evidence in policy development in Africa. Both researchers and policymakers often put their interests ahead of societal good. One of the workable ways of changing this attitude is to educate researchers and policymakers through enlightenment campaigns, trainings, workshops, seminars, symposia, etcetera on the broader and better, although longer term, benefits of the supply, uptake and use of research evidence for policy development.

The scarcity of quality research evidence in policy development has been blamed on the poor funding of the educational sector of many African states. The effect of poor funding is poor research or scarce quality research. Policymakers can only make research informed policies with available quality research evidence. The challenge of poor funding in many African states is tied to corrupt practices by government officers, including policymakers, who regard government institutions as money making bags for their personal benefits. So, it is either funds do not get to the educational sector or when they do, they are misappropriated by staffs of the sector. Besides eschewing corruption for self-aggrandizement, African governments and people need to develop their economies in order to be able to adequately fund and develop their educational sector to produce quality researchers and policymakers for quality research and policies.

Research shows that an appreciable number of policymakers in Africa lack research capacity as they do not know the meaning and uses of research evidence. They are quite

unaware of the benefits of research evidence and how to use it to drive effective policies. Some of the findings in the 2012 international conference organised by INASP is that illiteracy is responsible for a lack of value for research evidence and by extension the lack of appreciation for research based policies. The lack of capacity is fed by personal interests which have dampened the desire to acquire knowledge about research evidence. As indicated before, policymakers need to be educated on the bigger picture in terms of the broader and better benefits of research evidence to policy development. There is no standard mechanism for ensuring the quality of African research. In their research framed within the context of the African science granting councils (SCGs) and Pan-African research excellence initiative, Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula found that the performance parameters and indicators used to measure research quality and excellence by international donors which include publications in international peer-reviewed journals are often unavailable in the African context. They also found that apart from Uganda, most African calls for research grant proposals, and guidelines for submission, do not specifically mention research excellence, and in the cases where it is mentioned, specific parameters to measure excellence are not provided. (Tijssen & Kraemer-Mbula, 2018, p. 397) By the Nigerian NUC regulation, intellectual contributions is measured by publications which should meet certain standards like publication in authentic and reputable outlets and bibliographic checklist, regularity, circulation, accessibility or visibility, indexing coverage and exchange partnership amongst other standards of measure. Research in the field, however, indicate that these publication standards are not observed in practice resulting in the assessment of intellectual contributions by the number of publications rather than the quality of publications, when the true measure of quality publications should be their positive impact on the society.

In their response to the survey on what should be the top three performance indicators for assessing quality research, the respondents from thirteen African countries, indicated that the research should create awareness of societal issues, direct benefits to disadvantaged communities, and make new technological developments. On the meaning of excellent research, the respondents stated that the research should be able to solve a problem, improve the lives of people, or change policy. (Tijssen & Kraemer-Mbula, 2018, p. 398) Thus the parameters and indicators for quality and excellent research should be the ability of the research to positively change policies and solve societal problems. One of the ways of moving the focus of African researchers – especially academic researchers – from the numbers to quality and excellent publications which will positively impact society is to change the current standards for the appointment and promotion of academics. As indicated before, many African academic researchers have imbibed a culture of pursuing narrow personal goals through the number of publications than quality publications required for societal good. This posture can be changed by reviewing the standards for measuring the requirements for appointments and promotions in African Universities in a way that adequate attention is given to publications that contribute to policy development. If appointments and promotions especially to the higher cadre of the academic ranks – senior lecturer, reader or associate professor, and professor – are changed to require academics to show the public policy and or societal impact of their publications, the quality of their research will improve. The idea is that the desire of academics to achieve personal interest will

inevitably lead them to engage in quality research required to drive policy and societal development.

As already noted, one of the challenges to research evidence uptake is the want of quality. However, where such quality evidence exists, there is still the gap in their transfer to policymakers. Proper documentation has been identified as one of the challenges to the transfer of research evidence from researchers to policymakers. Given that personal testimony still enjoys great credence and legitimacy in Africa, research evidence should be stored by methods other than written documentation, wherever appropriate. Research evidence may be recorded through videos and pictures and transferred to policymakers using appropriate information and communication technology (ICT) tools and methods which are gaining increasing recognition in Africa. Apart from the fact that, in most cases, these tools and methods are faster, easier, cheaper and more convenient than formal written documentation of research evidence, Glowen Kyei-Mensah found that photographs are more powerful in influencing the opinions of policymakers than policy briefs. Thus, African researchers need to use the methods that are appropriate in the circumstance for the storage and transfer of research evidence to influence their uptake by policymakers.

CONCLUSION

Research evidence based policy development is premised on the belief that a greater use of research will lead to more effective policies. The evidence base for this claim is itself not overwhelmingly conclusive, given difficulties not only in asserting what an effective policy is, but also in dealing with counterfactuals. When evidence is narrowed to mean only research evidence, the role of other forms of evidence in policy making shrinks. Apart from research evidence, there are other intervening factors that influence policy development. What is paramount therefore is that research evidence is considered, together with other evidence and variables, in policy development.

At the heart of the challenge in the supply, uptake and use of research evidence in African is personal interests. The desire for personal benefits has induced many researchers to churn out poor research outputs which they blame on poor funding. On the other hand, many policymakers lack research capacity. Yet, some of them are at ease with their incapacity because it feeds their personal interests. The outcome is the scarcity of quality research and the inability of policymakers to use available research for policy development. The need to change this situation cannot be overemphasised. Personal interests which also influences other challenges to research supply, uptake and use in Africa, can be solved by educating researchers and policymakers through enlightenment campaigns and the development of the African educational sector. Apart from funding African universities and research, the standards for measuring intellectual contributions for the appointment and promotion of academics needs to be reviewed and observed to assure quality research for policy development.

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