



Policy Brief

Enhancing Policy Uptake in Central Africa: Navigating Challenges Faced by Think Tanks and Civil Society Actors

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Executive Summary

Policy uptake, the process through which research, evidence, and recommendations are integrated into actual policymaking and governance, is a critical step in achieving effective and sustainable development outcomes. In Central Africa, despite a wealth of research and advocacy efforts, many well-designed policies fail to translate into meaningful action or impact on the ground. This gap largely stems from systemic barriers embedded within political, institutional, and socio-economic contexts.

Think tanks and civil society organizations (CSOs) have traditionally served as providers of information and evidence to policymakers. However, this role, while important, often limits their influence to the periphery of decision-making processes. Policymaking is frequently perceived as a "black box," with opaque power dynamics and complex political negotiations that exclude or marginalize evidence-based contributions. This brief argues for a paradigm shift: think tanks and CSOs must evolve from passive information providers to active "policy entrepreneurs." As policy entrepreneurs, these actors can strategically navigate the political landscape, build alliances, frame issues persuasively, and leverage windows of opportunity to ensure that evidence-based policies are not only formulated but also adopted and implemented. By understanding and addressing the systemic barriers to policy uptake, think tanks and CSOs can play a transformative role in advancing governance and development in Central Africa.

Introduction

In Central Africa, a significant "knowledge-to-policy" gap persists, where high-quality research produced by think tanks and civil society actors fails to translate into actionable government policy. This disconnect is driven by a combination of restrictive political environments, "bounded rationality" among policymakers who lack the time or expertise to process complex data, and a lack of institutionalized mechanisms for civic engagement. Furthermore, many think tanks in the region suffer from "donor-dependency," which often aligns research agendas with international priorities rather than local political realities, leading to a lack of "ownership" by national governments. The objective of this brief is firstly to understand what are policy uptakes and identify the systemic barriers to these policy uptakes in Central Africa and provide a framework for think tanks and CSOs



to move beyond the "black box" of policymaking. It aims to transition these actors from being mere "information providers" to "policy entrepreneurs" who can navigate complex political landscapes to foster evidence-based governance.

Navigating the Challenges of Policy Uptake

Policy uptake refers to the translation of policy from intention to action, where citizens, businesses, and local governments adopt, implement and comply with new measures. It serves as a crucial indicator of a policy's effectiveness, necessitating deliberate strategies to surmount obstacles such as lack of awareness or motivation and ensure compliance or participation. Key aspects of policy uptake encompass Adoption and Implementation, which entails transitioning a policy from theory to practice and ensuring adherence, as well as Acceptance and Compliance, wherein the target groups' willingness to embrace new rules or programs can be swayed by incentives, social legitimacy, and capacity. In Central Africa, policy uptake is not merely the passage of legislation but the successful integration of that legislation into the daily lives of citizens. Think tanks and civil society actors play a crucial role in this context, as they are key to promoting and facilitating informed policy decisions. However, these organizations encounter numerous challenges that hinder their capacity to drive successful policy adoption and implementation.

Some Barriers to Policy uptakes

Barriers to policy uptake refer to the various challenges and obstacles that hinder the effective adoption, implementation, and sustainability of policies. These barriers can arise from political, economic, social, and institutional factors, which collectively affect how policies are received and executed at different levels of governance. Understanding these barriers is essential for improving policy design and ensuring that intended outcomes are achieved, particularly in regions where structural and contextual complexities present significant hurdles. This section explores the key factors that impede policy uptake, with a focus on the specific challenges faced in Central Africa.

✓ The Political Economy of Evidence

Policymaking in Central Africa is rarely a linear, rational process. Instead, it is characterized by "multiple streams" where problems, solutions, and politics must align for change to occur. Think tanks often fail because they focus solely on the "problem stream" (data) while ignoring the "politics stream" (the interests of ruling elites). In many Central African states, the dominance of neoliberal or technocratic approaches often marginalizes local "civic environmentalism" or social justice perspectives, treating policy as a technical exercise rather than a social contract.

✓ Institutional and Capacity Constraints

Many CSOs in the region operate in "closed" or "hybrid" political spaces where dissent is viewed with suspicion. This leads to a lack of "procedural justice," where the voices of marginalized groups are excluded from the design of development strategies. Additionally, the "implementation gap"—where laws exist on paper but are not enforced—remains a primary hurdle for think tanks that celebrate legislative wins without monitoring the delivery chain.

✓ Political Instability and Weak Governance:

Political instability and weak governance represent significant barriers to effective policy uptake in many African countries. Frequent changes in government, political unrest, and power struggles



often disrupt the continuity and consistency needed for successful policy implementation. Weak governance structures—characterized by limited administrative capacity, lack of transparency, and corruption—undermine public trust and reduce the effectiveness of institutions responsible for enforcing policies. This environment creates uncertainty and hampers long-term planning, resulting in policies that are either poorly executed or abandoned altogether. Consequently, political instability and governance challenges severely limit the potential for sustainable development and social progress across the continent.

✓ **Limited Capacity and Resources:**

Limited capacity and resources pose a major obstacle to the successful uptake of policies in Africa. Many countries face shortages in skilled personnel, technical expertise, and institutional frameworks necessary to design, implement, and monitor policies effectively. Additionally, constrained financial resources restrict the ability to fund critical programs, infrastructure, and public services that policies often depend on for success. This scarcity of human and material resources leads to delays, incomplete execution, and sometimes failure to translate policy goals into tangible outcomes. Without adequate capacity and resources, even well-intentioned policies struggle to achieve their intended impact, impeding social and economic development across the region.

✓ **Weak Linkages Between Research and Policymaking:**

There is often a disconnect between researchers and policymakers, with limited communication channels and mutual understanding. Evidence may be poorly communicated or not tailored to the political context, reducing its influence.

✓ **Donor Dependency and Fragmentation:**

Donor dependency and fragmentation present significant challenges to policy uptake in Africa. Many countries rely heavily on international aid and donor funding to support development initiatives, which can lead to an overdependence on external resources. This reliance often results in policies that are shaped more by donor priorities and conditions than by domestic needs and contexts, reducing local ownership and commitment. Additionally, the involvement of multiple donors with different agendas and approaches can cause fragmentation, leading to uncoordinated efforts, duplication, and inefficient use of resources. Such fragmentation complicates policy coherence and implementation, undermining the effectiveness and sustainability of development programs across the continent.

Practical Framework for Think Tanks and CSOs to Enhance Policy Uptake

To enhance and build effective policy uptakes within the Central African region, the following recommendations are advanced, which if effectively followed and implemented, the continent is sure to move from paper to policy.

1. Build Political and Contextual Intelligence

Building political and contextual intelligence is essential for effective policy development and uptake, especially in complex environments such as those found in many African countries. This involves gaining a deep understanding of the local political landscape, power dynamics, cultural norms, and socio-economic conditions that influence how policies are perceived and implemented. By investing in comprehensive context analysis and stakeholder engagement, policymakers can



tailor strategies to address specific challenges and leverage opportunities unique to each setting. Political and contextual intelligence also helps anticipate potential obstacles, align policies with local priorities, and foster stronger buy-in from communities and political actors. Ultimately, this intelligence enhances the relevance, feasibility, and sustainability of policies, contributing to more successful outcomes.

2. Engage in Strategic Relationship-Building and Coalition Formation

- Develop trusted relationships with key policymakers, influencers, and gatekeepers.
- Build broad coalitions including government actors, private sector, media, and community leaders to enhance legitimacy and pressure for change. Single organizations rarely have the leverage to change national policy. CSOs should form coalitions with diverse actors, including religious leaders, private sector associations, and traditional authorities, to create a "unified voice" that is harder for governments to ignore
- Leverage regional and international networks to amplify influence and resources.

3. Facilitate Inclusive and Participatory Policymaking Processes

- Promote mechanisms for inclusive dialogue and stakeholder engagement to build ownership and reduce resistance.
- Support capacity-building for policymakers and implementers to understand and apply evidence.
- Encourage feedback loops and iterative policy adjustments based on monitoring and evaluation.

4. Actively Navigate and Leverage Policy Windows

- Identify and seize moments when political conditions are favorable for policy change (e.g., leadership shifts, crises, international commitments).
- Position think tanks and CSOs as timely problem solvers and trusted advisors during these windows.
- Maintain flexibility to adapt strategies in response to changing contexts.

Conclusion

To move beyond the traditional "black box" of policymaking in Central Africa, think tanks and CSOs must embrace a more proactive and strategic role as policy entrepreneurs. By understanding systemic barriers and applying a practical framework that combines political insight, coalition-building, effective communication, and adaptive engagement, these organizations can significantly enhance the uptake and implementation of evidence-based policies. This transformation is essential for fostering governance that is responsive, inclusive, and capable of delivering sustainable development outcomes.

Enhancing policy uptake in Central Africa requires a shift from "rationalist" assumptions to a "political-process" understanding of governance. Think tanks and CSOs must recognize that evidence does not speak for itself; it must be championed by actors who understand the nuances of power, timing, and coalition-building. By addressing the "epistemic uncertainties" of policymakers



with clear, localized, and politically savvy evidence, civil society can bridge the gap between research and transformative action.

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