



# Research And Policy Development In Africa: The Role Of Universities As Think Tanks

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research is essential for the University system as citadel of tertiary education. As Think Tank, the university is a stakeholder in policy process of nations aimed at solving problems. This paper aimed at identifying the role universities in Africa should play in relating this independent variable, Research, to the dependent variable, Policy development considering status of Africa as continent of developing states. African states, universities and citizens will find results of this study useful in refocusing nations towards achieving developmental goals. A combined qualitative and quantitative methodology was adopted using secondary data provided by African Development Bank (AFDB). It was discovered that universities' involvement in policy process of African countries has not yielded desired results due to limitation in scope (policy formulation stage) and limited funding. Statistics on Total population of African states have not shown commensurate enhancement in Income per capita; rather, they indicate negative impact portrayed in Debt profile and Infant mortality rate. This could be due to non-qualitative partnership of government and other stakeholders. The study recommended that tripartite relationship of government, private sector and universities should exist through policy Formulation, Adoption to Implementation stages noting adequate funding and regional cooperation of tertiary institutions.

**Keywords:** Research, Think Tank, Policy Development, Independent Variable and Dependent Variable.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Research is a systematic investigation and study of materials as well as sources aimed at establishing facts or reaching new conclusions. It is a means by which science is applied to solve problems as it helps to shape societies. As it applies to the real world situation, its main purposes include Exploratory, Descriptive and Explanatory (Babbie, 2016). It seeks to unravel how and why a person thinks, feels or acts in a particular way. Policy development is critical to the life of societies and success of governance as it provides avenue for consideration of data and evidence. This enables government to free up unused data, analyse and implement same to meet identified gaps in societies. It is greatly influenced by the environment and it serves as a driving force for development. It fosters synergy and coordination among stakeholders in policy formulation and implementation as it relies on expertise, knowledge and research.

A university as a citadel of learning, derived from the Latin word 'universitas' connoting 'a whole', is essentially an institution of tertiary education and research. Tertiary education is a pillar for human and national development (Ijeoma and Nwaodu, 2013). The contribution of knowledge to societal development is incontrovertible.

Education is obviously a most important medium through which socially transforming elements of development are disseminated. It bears hope for a society's future (Felleke, 2005). Still as posited by Felleke (2005), two main facets of education, for which the university is a major projector, can be identified namely as, Education for literacy and Education for advancement. The former stands for society's reproduction of existing knowledge (education widening) while the latter denotes the quantity and quality of education and research (education deepening). This latter category is an asset to decision makers at different levels.

A Think Tank can be seen as a consultative committee of experts which undertakes research and gives advice to government. It could be in the form of commission, advisory board or panel. To Richardson and Jordan (1979), Think Tanks are policy communities, part of political systems with functional responsibilities, vested interests and specialized knowledge. They are populated mainly by government agencies, pressure groups and academics. They can cover areas of social policy, political strategy, economy, military, technology and culture. They are basically non-profit organizations. Some are funded by government, others by advocacy groups and the business sector. More than 4,500 policy institutes exist worldwide (Stone in Fischer, Miller and Sidney, 2006). Think Tank as a term originated in the 1950s though such organizations existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A university fits into this description and thus can be regarded as a Think Tank for the government of any nation as it relates to the policy process.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A researcher always strives at solving an identified problem by bridging an existing gap as he enhances knowledge in a given area. In this paper, Research is the Independent variable while Policy development is the Dependent variable.

Africa is essentially composed of former colonies of the developed Western powers which though have political independence, still wallow, to a great extent, within the tentacles of underdevelopment. The fifty countries of the continent have attained independence for decades, operate different models of governmental system, own many universities and other research institutes or Think Tanks but have not overcome the shackles of underdevelopment. This is manifest in key areas of existence which according to Dudley Seers, can be visibly monitored through the levels of poverty, unemployment and inequality pervading the continent. Identified problems in government are obviously solved through enunciation and implementation of policies. Then, what is wrong with the general policy environment in Africa that positive results have not been achieved? This is the gap to be filled.

This paper therefore seeks to clarify the role of universities, the repository of knowledge and research in enhancing policy development in Africa, aimed at general development.

### **Objectives of the Study**

Generally the objective of this paper is to examine the contribution of universities through research, to policy formulation and implementation in Africa. Also, it aims at achieving the following:

- a. Examine the aim of tertiary education in Africa;
- b. Examine current role of research of the universities within the African region as regards development; and
- c. Identify the role universities, as Think Tanks should play to impact positively on the policy environment in Africa.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

Research could be mainly exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. It is exploratory to the extent that it could also be to indicate a new angle to an old idea, giving room for a different perspective. The research could be descriptive to the extent that it gives a detailed description of the happenings, seeking to answer the 'what and how' questions. The explanatory research seeks to answer the 'why' questions.

Broadly, there could be basic research which entails essentially investigating for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge without the thought of applying such derived knowledge. Applied research however, in addition to acquiring the new knowledge, directs same to a specific aim. Research should be objective, verifiable and repeatable (Popoola, 1999). It is objective in that it is a genuine search for truth. It is verifiable for it deals with situations that can be proved right or wrong. It is repeatable in that the same result will be achieved using the specified procedures.

Anderson (1975) posits that a public policy is a deliberate act of government to solve an identified problem. Dror (1989) views it as an impartial act of government aimed at directing affairs to reach goals of positively influencing lives of the people. It is a guideline to address specific national issues.

The policy process encompasses the following:

Agenda setting - identifying the problem areas for focus

Formulation - developing alternative options for solving the identified problem, considering the merits and demerits of the alternatives utilizing available research findings

Adoption - making an informed authoritative choice, forgoing others. This is based on expertise and knowledge from analysed data.

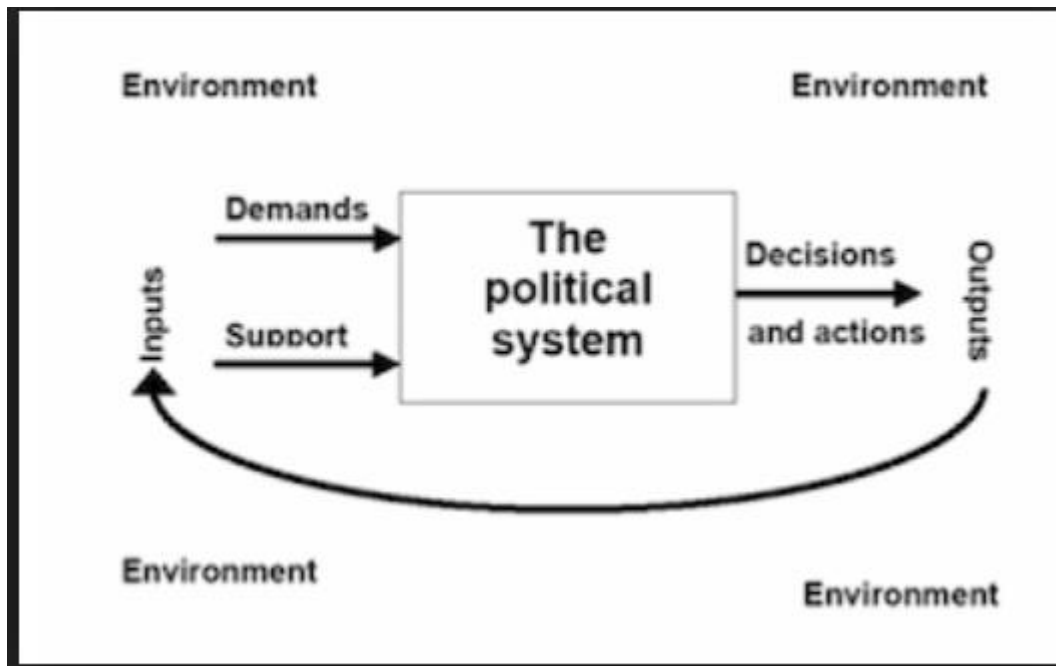
Implementation - execution of chosen option with the aim of avoiding either Programme or Theory failure.

Evaluation - assessment stage.

Broadly, there are three main types of public policies namely, Regulatory, Distributive and Redistributive (Meier, 2002). A regulatory policy is to limit actions of people or groups for the purpose of protecting them from potential harm. This could be in forms of consumer protection or drug enforcement administration. A distributive policy which is the most common, could utilize tax revenue to ensure provision of public goods for the benefit of all. A redistributive policy entails taking from a group (privileged) to give to another group (less privileged) to ensure social welfare for all. This could be in the form of social security administration. It is pertinent to note that these types of policies, derivable from research, are all aimed at the development of a society.

Two models are relevant for this study namely, David Easton's Model and Triple Helix Approach.

**David Easton's Input-Output model**



**Source:** Anifowose, R. and Enemu, F. (2008). Elements of politics. Lagos: Sam Iroanusi Publications.

As seen above, Easton's input is composed of demands and support. Demands can be in respect of allocation of goods and services, behavioural regulation, and Participatory politics Demand can only be satisfied with support. This can be in forms of payment of taxes, obedience or loyalty and participation. This is also facilitated by the feedback mechanism.

Output as: Policies and decisions can be regulatory, distributive or redistributive.

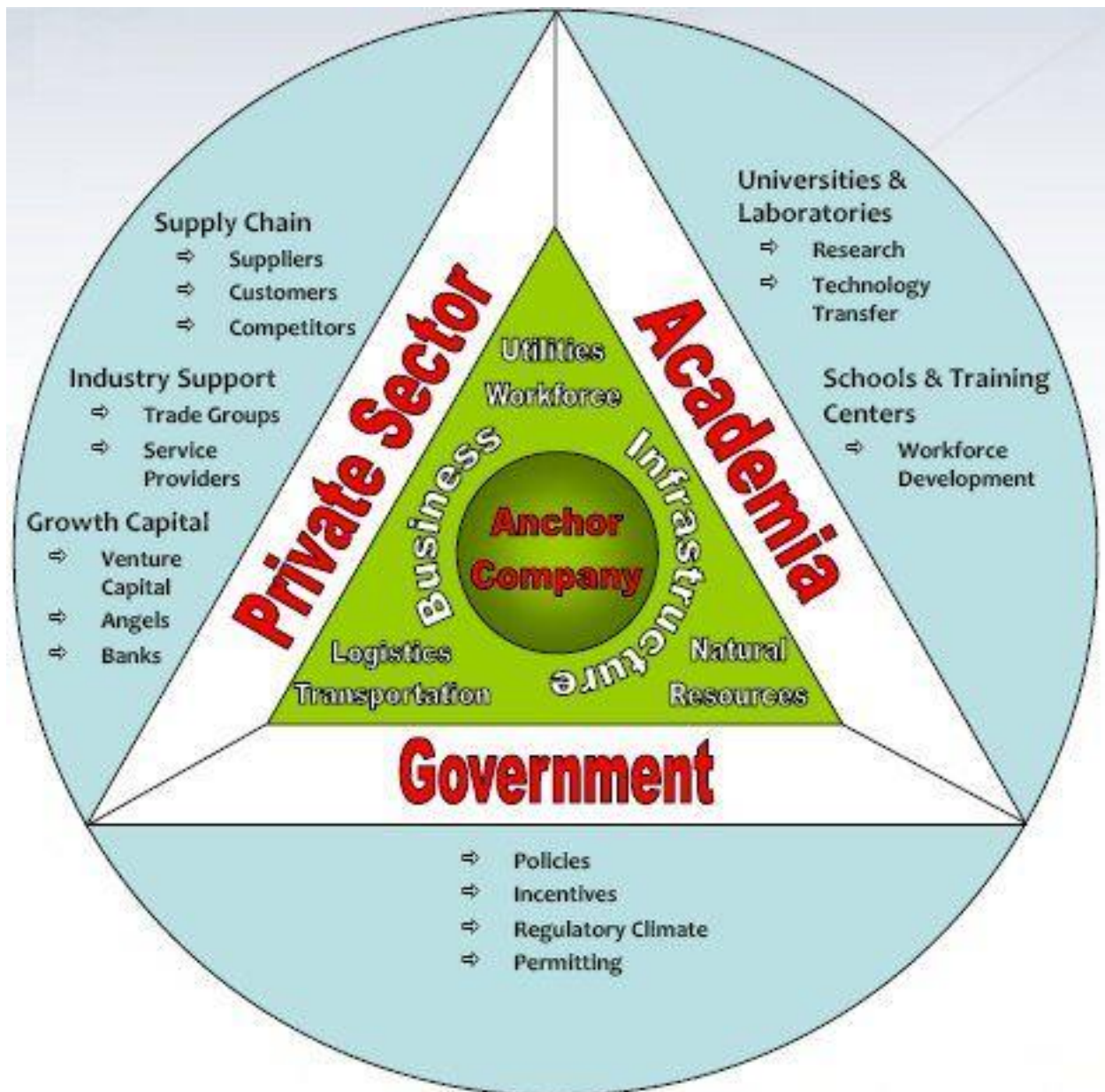
All these activities take place within a given environment of a State.

In the diagram above, Easton posits that Input comes into the political system as demands from the environment. These can be fostered by structures, for example, political parties, Think Tanks and so on. They are processed through the machinery of government in forms of executive, legislative and judicial

institutions and results are decisions and actions to be implemented. Depending on the satisfaction of the people, feedback is given to the system in form of support and loyalty which connotes satisfaction or demands in form of unfulfilled expectations for the process to commence all over again. This process keeps all parties involved in governance, both government and the governed.

There is also the Triple Helix Approach (Etzkowitz and Leydesdoff, 2000) which requires government to partner with universities and the private sector in countries to foster policy formulation and implementation. This is in the area of analyzing data from research to inform decisions. Governments should allow these stakeholders to analyse available data and apply them.

This is diagrammatically represented below:



Source: Etzkowitz and Leydesdoff (2000). The triple helix model.

This tripartite relationship of universities embarking on research and development, private sector, providing capital and service delivery and government, providing the enabling environment and evolving policies creates a platform for flexible partnering, creativity and innovation. This collaboration builds mutual trust and opportunities for development.

This paper which seeks to answer the ‘why’ question about not having the effect of research on policy development will use these two models in its presentation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used in this paper is mainly qualitative as secondary data has been derived from textbooks, journals, other publications and the internet. These include African Development Bank Statistics Pocket Book, International Universities Bureau on higher education and research for sustainable development, Science and Public Policy on <https://doi.org/10.1093>, University World News on <http://www.universityworldnews.com> and <https://www.afidep.org>. They relate to the independent and dependent variables which are: Research and Policy development respectively. Some measure of descriptive statistics has been employed due to some tabular presentation involved, which introduces some degree of quantitative work.

### **Research and Policy Development**

As posited by Felleke in Ogbeide, D. R.(2018), two clear forms of education can be identified, namely, “Education for literacy (education widening) and Education for advancement (education deepening)”. The former merely takes the beneficiary out of the cycle of ignorance but the latter goes further to utilize it as a spring board to achieving national development.

The university as an ivory tower of learning as well as a Think tank is incontrovertible. It also satisfies the general aim of tertiary education in any country. These include among other things, to:

1. Contribute to national development through manpower training;
2. Develop proper values for survival of individuals and society;
3. Develop intellectual capacity to appreciate local/international milieus;
4. Acquire skills to be self-reliant and useful in community
5. Promote national unity; and
6. Promote national/international relationship (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005).

During World War II, Think Tanks were generally referred to as ‘Brain Boxes’. Most of the Think Tanks in existence today came into being after 1970. They vary by ideology, topical emphasis, funding source and prospective consumers. The effect of globalization on Think Tanks is highly evident in Africa, Eastern Europe and South East Asia.

In considering the relevance of Think Tanks to policy formulation, it is necessary to note that some experts’ knowledge are scientific and objective but limited in relevance to policy judgments. On the other hand, there could be skills that are less scientific but with broader policy contributions. There should therefore be an appropriate balance between ‘narrow but deep’ and ‘broad but shallow’ expert contributions to policy formulation. The ability of government executive to ask relevant questions from experts and understand the significance of answers for administrative decision making is crucial to successful accomplishment of policy process.

To many scholars, the main problem of developing countries in public policy process lies in the inability of policy makers to induce development through inhibited knowledge and commitment in making proper judgments.

To Anifowose and Enemuoh (2008:305), the failure of policy process is aided in the developing or underdeveloped countries of the world by unrealistic goals and hatching expectations which cannot be met by system capacities. This unrealistic goal setting arises from insufficient reliable information and/or the non-existence or suppression of opportunities to suggest alternative policy options. Difficulties in realizing successful and effective policy process in this region also include insufficient funding for the programmes on the policies which obviously affects the whole process (Faniran and Akintayo, 2013).

Formulation – This is when alternative options to solving the perceived problems are suggested and examined. A cost-benefit analysis is made in respect of the various options.

Adoption – This is when a specific choice of option is made. This entails the use of adequate Decision-making process which could be Rational Comprehensive, Incrementalism (Muddling Through) or Mixed Scanning models. With a proponent like Herbert Simon, the Comprehensive model requires that all information on the alternative options is examined and the most beneficial option is selected. The Muddling Through model of Charles Lindblom uses the existing situation with an incremental modification while The Mixed Scanning model of Amitai Etzioni adopts a synthesis of the two other models.

Implementation – This is when the adopted option in the form of policy is put into use. To Anifowose and Enemu (2008:290), this policy of government is now seen as response of the political system to the pressures generated from the environment.

David Easton's Political System model whereby Inputs in forms of Demands and Support through the Conversion Box (system) producing Outputs in forms of authoritative decisions with a feedback mechanism which generates fresh Inputs, is explanatory of this policy process.

Demands are in forms of requests or noticed problems while Support would be in form of loyalty which could increase or decrease. Authoritative decisions could be in form of Acts of parliament, government policies or judicial decisions. These all occur within a given environment which could be a state. The feedback system is essential as it paves way for continuing, modifying or abrogating the policy.

The Triple Helix Approach espoused by Etzkowitz and Leydesdoff (2000) explains the tripartite relationship of government (public sector), private sector and the university (Think Tank) in fostering qualitative policy formulation and implementation in countries.



**Source: Etzkowitz, H. and Leydesdoff (2000). The triple helix model.**

Some statistics given below on African countries (AfDB, 2018) reveal critical aspects of the continent's deficiencies as it relates to development which continually makes policy development crucial.

2.1 Basic Indicators / Indicateurs de base

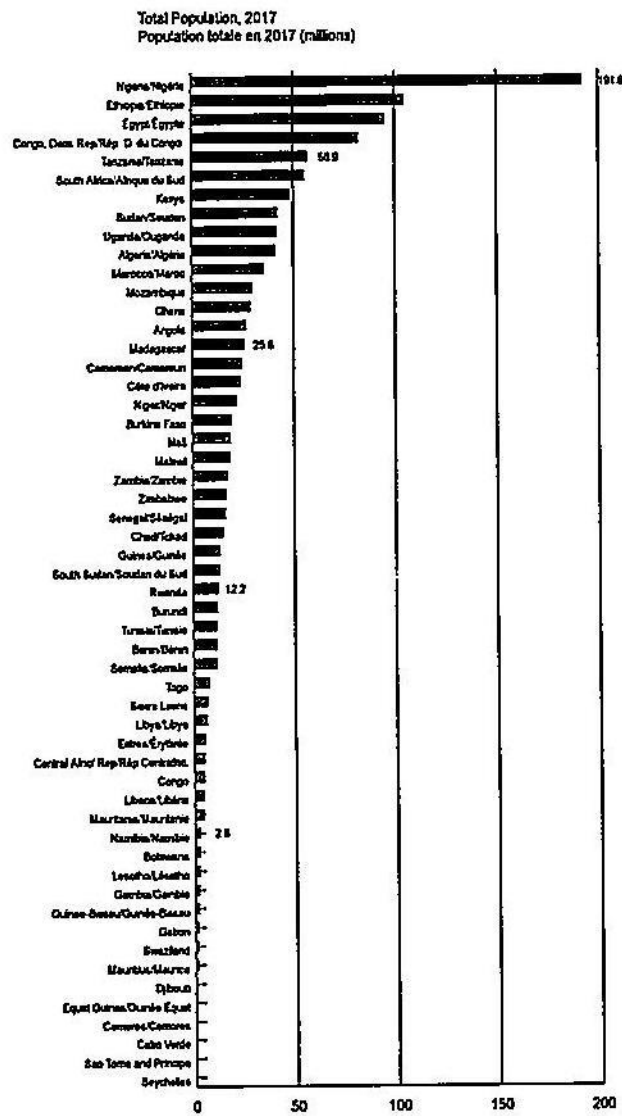
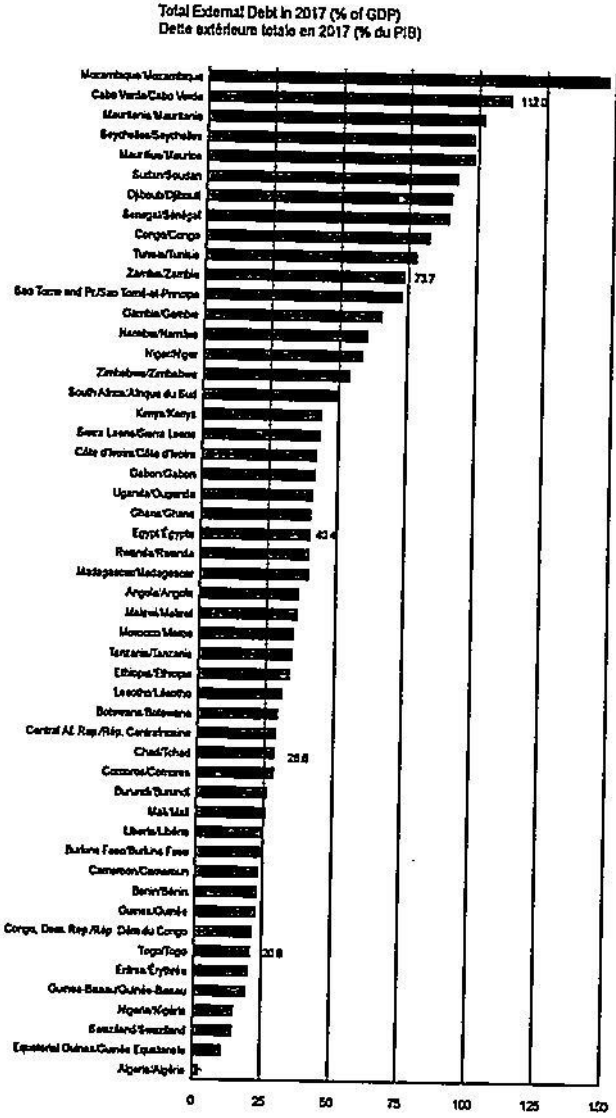


Fig. 1. Total Population (2017).  
Source: AfDB Statistics Pocketbook (2018).

2.5 Debt • Dette

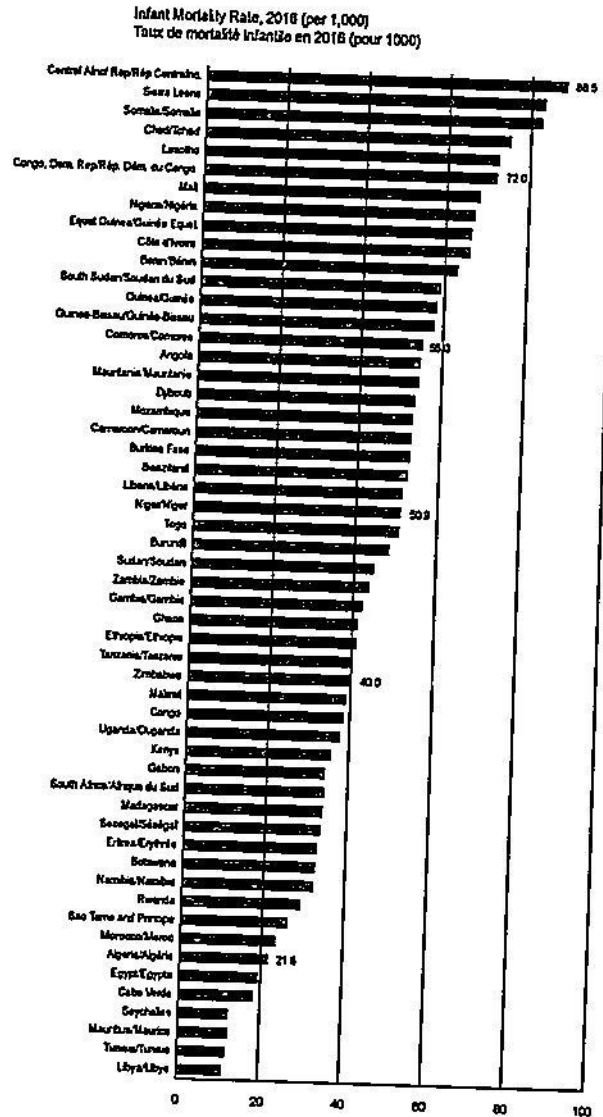


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Fig. 2. Total External Debt in 2017 (% of GDP).  
 Source: AfDB Statistics Pocketbook (2018).



2.2 Demographic Indicators - Indicateurs démographiques



AfDB Statistics

Fig. 3. Infant Mortality Rate in 2016 (per 1000).  
Source: AfDB Statistics Pocketbook (2018).

Livre de poche

2.1. Base Indicateurs \* Indicateurs de base

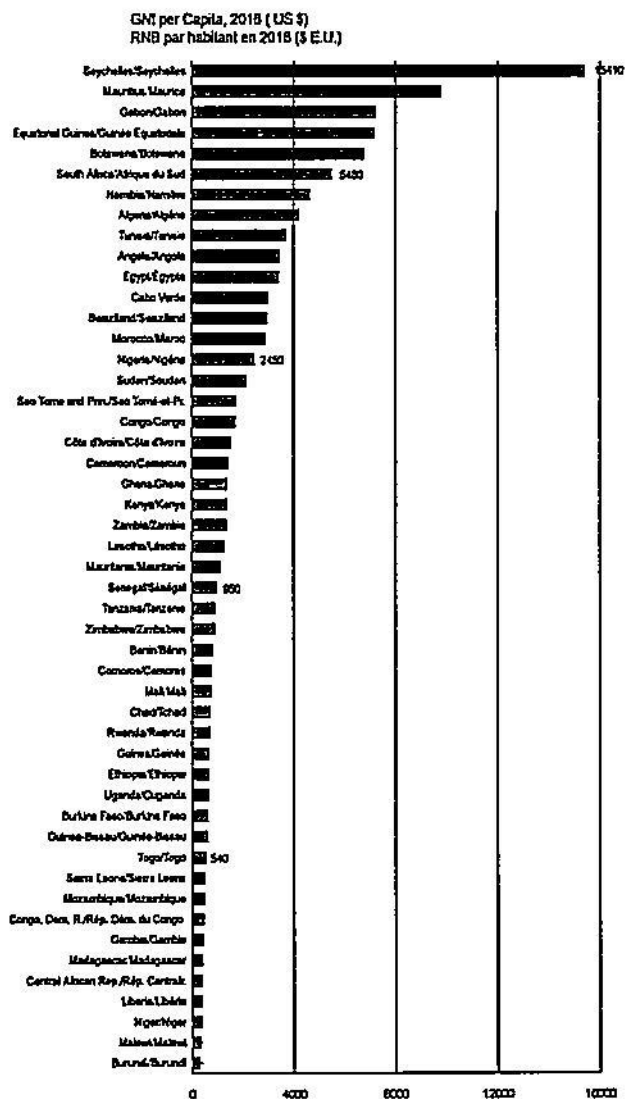


Fig. 4. GNI Per Capita in 2016 (\$).  
Source: AfDB Statistics Pocketbook (2018).

In a study by the Swedish Institute for Growth Policy Studies, the relevance and impact of Research and development, R&D are laid bare for all to see. The United States of America, US has a history of successfully turning returns into commercially-viable products and services. In 2002, the report adds, the federal government spent \$81 billion, while universities and colleges carried out \$37 billion worth of

R&D. Of the total amount spent on R&D in the US, the study highlighted industries (within the private sector) as the biggest spenders (Punch Newspaper, 2018).

Universities are naturally suitable for research. Unfortunately in Nigeria for example, the basic things needed to conduct successful research are not available in many of these institutions. For instance, experts have lamented that basic laboratory tools like Bunsen burners are not available.

The African Institute for Development Policy (AFIDEP) is an African-led, regional non-profit policy think tank established in 2010 to help bridge the gaps between research, policy and practice in development efforts in Africa. It analyses, synthesizes, and translates evidence (i.e. data and research) to generate or strengthen political commitment, inform resource allocation, programme design and implementation. The aim is to contribute to the realisation of sustainable development by enabling the formulation of sound policies and programme interventions ([www.afidep.org](http://www.afidep.org)).

AFIDEP uses three development sectors to provide direct support to policymakers in enabling evidence use, and these form the remaining three areas of its work, including population change, sustainable development, education and skills development.

Available research is largely fragmented in different scientific publications and not appropriately packaged for use by decision-makers. Evidence often does not fully meet the policy and programme needs of decision-makers since they rarely contribute to the initial identification of the knowledge gaps that the evidence seeks to fill. Use of evidence is particularly weak in closing the big gap between policies and implementation, which constitutes one of the most critical development challenges in Africa.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Parameters for examining the status of African states as developing nations from the above tabular presentations (AfDB, 2018) are majorly Population, External Debt, Gross national income per capita and Infant mortality.

From Figures 1 and 2 above (2017 details), Zambia for instance, with a population of less than 25million has External debt/GDP ratio of 73.7%. Namibia of 2.6million population has External debt/GDP ratio of above 50%.

Similarly, from Figures 3 and 4 above (2016 details), Nigeria with Gross national Income per capita of \$2,450 has Infant mortality rate /1000 of over 60 while Senegal for instance, with GNI per capita of \$950 has Infant mortality rate /1000 of less than 40.

These show at a glance that research still has a lot to contribute in the evolution of policies that will make life better for Africans and Universities are critical stakeholders in this respect.

The huge debt overhang is a debilitating factor to the funding base for increased research in universities. The contemporary role of universities as Think Tanks has mainly been in advisory capacity, more skewed towards policy formulation, not much in policy adoption and almost non-existent in policy implementation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The relevance of Easton's Input-output model and the necessity for a concerted implementation of Triple Helix Approach has been vividly highlighted from this study.

It is a committed joint effort that can materially affect the developmental picture of African states considering the benchmarks of poverty, welfare and relevance in the comity of Nations (Matthew, 2011).

Complying with the objectives of these work, there are several universities across African countries with ownership spanning across government and private levels. They are also engaging in various levels of research and serving at professional levels as Think Tanks. This has however not accomplished enough for the region. The universities need to partner more and continuously with government beyond the formulation stage of public policies. This will make the impact of research visible in policy development.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the Conclusion above, some relevant recommendations are necessary as given below:

1. African governments should work with universities and the private sector in Policy Formulation, Adoption and Implementation. It should not be limited to the Formulation stage.
2. African governments should muster the will to free up unused data for universities to analyse for potential application by the same government.
3. Research should be seen as different from sheer consulting. Research denotes more involvement as required of a stakeholder.
4. There should be regional cooperation among universities as Think Tanks in the policy process across Africa; and
5. Respective countries in Africa should ensure adequate funding for their universities to engage in relevant research for developmental purposes by emphasizing both academic and research areas at all times.

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