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**Payment and
independence:
Does a client relationship
with government inhibit
'think-tank' criticism?**

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South African Institute of International Affairs

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ABSTRACT

Policy research institutions (or 'think-tanks') will be challenged to retain their objectivity on public policy issues regardless of their source of funds, in processes such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Drawing from the Nigerian situation (with particular reference to experience under military government) while suggesting a more general application, this paper sets out to analyse the relationship between privately and publicly funded think-tanks and government, and the extent to which that relationship may change commensurate with the extent of government funding. It investigates the extent of the real or notional independence of think-tanks. The paper argues that a transactional approach is necessary to understand the relationship between think-tanks and government and suggests six intervening variables necessary for understanding the nature and level of think-tank independence. These variables require close analysis in order to understand the nature of the relationship between the institution's independence and its sources of funds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION: TRANSITION AFTER THE TRANSITION

Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999 was a critical juncture for many Nigerian think-tanks.¹ During almost 33 years of more or less permanent military rule that followed a coup d'état in 1966, think-tanks, both public and private, underwent varied experiences at the hands of government. Although some new ones were established (such as the Centre for Democratic Studies, set up during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida from 1985 to 1993), most public think-tanks fell victim to neglect.

In part this was because their funding declined precipitously. Governments did not see specialised research institutions or universities as priorities; at best, the military saw them as avoidable nuisances and at worst as part of the opposition to military rule. A second reason was extensive political interference in their work. Procedures for the appointment of leadership and staff in practice became part of the patronage system that earned notoriety for successive Nigerian military governments. Thirdly, as a result of the economic crises that marked much of the period of military rule, many scientists and researchers at public think-tanks left Nigeria for greener pastures abroad. Fourthly, given poor funding, an extreme patronage system and a crippling brain drain, many public think-tanks became dumping grounds for unqualified staff, resulting in a rapid decline in both their professionalism and the quality of output. Finally, public think-tanks were faced with increasing competition for financial resources and staff from their private counterparts, which became very active during military rule.

Given this unprecedented decline in publicly funded policy research institutions, Nigeria's private think-tanks increasingly came to be regarded as alternative centres of knowledge. Many staff from universities and public think-tanks migrated to them. At the same time, because many foreign donors were reluctant to support Nigerian government bodies directly or to channel money through corrupt military governments, they directed their funds towards private think-tanks. In addition, private think-tanks were active in research, policy and advocacy work for the pro-democracy movement, which made them prime targets of the military government, particularly its security agencies. From time to time some would be shut down.

Since military rule ended, however, think-tanks in Nigeria necessarily have embarked on a process of transition. Indeed, their present situation might be described as 'a transition after the transition' and it has brought with it a series of challenges. For private institutions, the first of these is to adjust to a massive 'post-military' reconstruction and reform of public think-tanks and universities, at the hands of the state and of foreign funding agencies. For example, the effect of a programme of re-building selected universities launched by the Ford, MacArthur and Carnegie foundations has generally been to reduce the size of their grants to private think-tanks. In a lecture delivered in December 2003 at the Ahmadu Bello University, the president of the MacArthur Foundation contended that there is a link between strong democracy and strong universities, a link that he believed justified the substantial investments his foundation was making in re-building some Nigerian universities.²

Secondly, funding agencies increasingly demand greater commitment to an improved quality of administration and management. Given the difficult environment that obtained under the military governments, many funders were willing to overlook such issues – indeed, at that time many private think-tanks were run merely by the founder and a few

friends, in a manner appropriate to their situation – but the need now is to transcend this ‘foundling’ stage and improve institutional structures.

Thirdly, in terms of their programmes and staffing, private think-tanks must now face up to more stringent competition from their public counterparts and from universities, which are able to attract better staff and thereby raise the quality of their work. To exacerbate the problem, many international organisations are setting up in Nigeria and drawing from the same pool of staff. Generally able to offer neither the job security public think-tanks and universities can offer, nor the high pay of international organisations, private think-tanks have become net losers of staff.

Nevertheless, public think-tanks are not yet out of the morass of poor funding, poor management and declining quality of staff that characterised the military government era. Many funding agencies continue to approach them with caution and they still cannot attract the staff complement they need for optimum efficiency and effectiveness. In addition they face the challenge of re-building the social commitment and relevance destroyed under the military (in practice many of them were converted to mere publicity vehicles for successive governments, geared essentially to whitewashing military rule).

In sum, perhaps the most important challenge faced by all Nigeria’s think-tanks is financial. Given declining funding opportunities in a post-military environment, following the realignment of priorities by donors and new approaches to funding, government is re-emerging as a major source of funding. This raises the question of independence. Whether a client relationship with government inhibits criticism of the authorities on the part of think-tanks is the central question of this paper.

ENCOUNTERS WITH GOVERNMENT

Many think-tanks are either non- or quasi-governmental in nature and their position vis-à-vis the state is, therefore, central to an understanding of their role. Given that a distinguishing feature of think-tanks in general should be their independence from government; two views predominate in characterising the relationship. The first sees it as inherently one of conflict and tension: the state is reactionary and resistant to ‘progressive’ change while think-tanks, especially private ones, represent progress and development. This reading owes much to experiences of authoritarian regimes in the Third World, but it might seem suspect for general application because while many independent think-tanks have championed democratisation in such circumstances, others patently played a reactionary role. In many cases, too, the impetus for democratisation has genuinely and independently arisen within the state.

A second characterisation of the connection between think-tanks and the state regards it as co-operative and complementary. This is a common view in the developed world, underpinned as it is by Western pluralist conceptions of the political process. It portrays the state as constantly drawing on the work of think-tanks, which governments themselves frequently set up to provide alternative policy options; while political parties use them to help monitor the political terrain and advise on electoral needs. In short, think-tanks are portrayed as an integral part of the government mind, the policy options they develop feeding the social dynamic that produces order and stability in society.

This viewpoint draws from a Western analysis of relations between civil society and

government that portrays them as complementary and co-operative. Thus, in discussing relations between the state and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Europe, Gidron, Kramer and Salamon speak of a ‘collaborative agent partnership’.³ Taylor and Lindsay discuss ‘market pluralist and welfare pluralist’ arrangements⁴ while Kramer posits a ‘pragmatic partnership’.⁵

Pluralist analysis generally and the co-operative-complementary thesis in particular have, however, been criticised as inapplicable in non-European settings. For one thing, their notion of a society in equilibrium flies in the face of the constant imbalance, crisis, change and discontinuity common in the developing societies of the Third World.. For another, the acceptance, implicit in the argument, of parallel and co-ordinated social forces masks a real division of society into dominant and subordinate classes with contradictory interests. Above all, it has been argued, the portrayal of a *Gesellschaft*, associational and cohesive society has very limited application in the African situation, in which communalism and mechanical restraints predominate.

A flaw common to both characterisations is a portrayal of think-tanks as uniform in nature. There is need for an approach that both de-constructs and disaggregates. De-construction demands an understanding of the social dynamics that drive the relationships at different points in time; and disaggregating means enquiring into the various kinds of think-tanks and the nature of their encounters with government.

Two aspects should then become clear. The first is that relations between governments and think-tanks – whether antagonistic or complementary – are not uniform but multi-form; there is therefore a need to approach them in their specific historical context. Hence it is necessary to adopt an ideographic approach (aimed at understanding the specifics of each case) in order to arrive at a nomothetic conclusion (i.e. one that identifies general unifying characteristics). This process results in a clearer classification and definition of the range of think-tanks and their relations with government, particularly on funding and independence.

Secondly, there is need for a diachronic approach, which examines changes that take place over time, rather than its synchronic converse. This demands analyses of the forces that determine the historical development of the state, of think-tanks and their encounters within a specific time frame. Consequently it is useful to employ a transactional framework when investigating exchanges between think-tanks and government.

CLASSIFICATION OF NIGERIAN THINK-TANKS

As indicated earlier, think-tanks in Nigeria may be categorised broadly into public or private. While the former are usually established and funded statutorily by government, the latter are not. It is possible to identify five sub-categories within these two categories, as follows:

PUBLIC THINK-TANKS

1. **Specialised scientific institutes.** These are specialised research institutes dealing with a particular issue of scientific importance. Government establishes them to pursue

research on specific areas of national interest. A good example is the Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria

2. **Social research institutes and centres.** These deal with diverse socio-economic and political issues and their activities are more political than those of the specialised scientific institutes. Examples of social research institutes include the Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research and the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs.
3. **Specialised training institutes.** These bodies provide further training for certain categories of government personnel. Their mandate often includes contributing to the policy process. Examples include the Nigerian Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies, which trains high level political and career government personnel, and the Administrative Staff College of Nigeria.
4. **Government advisory bodies.** These are ad hoc commissions established to advise the government on specific issues, for example the Presidential Commission on the Reform of the Administration of Justice in Nigeria.
5. **Professional councils established by government.** The government establishes such organisations to monitor and regulate certain trades and professions. Examples include the Nigerian Medical Council and the Council of Registered Engineers of Nigeria.

PRIVATE THINK TANKS

1. **Non-governmental research and advocacy-based centres.** These combine strong academic research with advocacy. Many of them were established under military rule and tried to link social research with politically relevant work, particularly directed at a return to civilian government. Good examples include the Centre for Democracy and Development and the Centre for Advanced Social Science.
2. **Non-governmental academies.** Umbrella organisations established by academic associations to provide leadership to researchers in specific areas. Examples include the Social Science Academy of Nigeria, an umbrella research organisation of social scientists.
3. **Professional associations.** These are disciplinary associations that often bring together graduates and advanced researchers in specific academic disciplines. Some are solely for academics while others bring together academics and practitioners. A good example is the Nigerian Political Science Association.
4. **Private sector guilds and associations.** Private sector practitioners often establish guilds and associations which mutate into think-tanks that conduct research and elaborate policy options for government. Examples include the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria and the Nigerian Guild of Editors.
5. **Intellectual trade unions.** Trade unions have emerged as important think-tanks. Many have strong research units, which have enabled them take leadership roles in policy. Examples include the Nigeria Labour Congress and Academic Staff Union of Universities.

PROSPERO, STEPHANO AND CALIBAN: THE POLITICS OF FUNDING

In William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero, exiled from his dukedom in Milan, is marooned on an island where he meets Caliban, the aborigine. After an initial friendship, Prospero brutally enslaves Caliban; later, in an attempt to escape Prospero's thralldom Caliban takes one of Prospero's servants, Stephano, as his god, enjoining him to kill Prospero and take over the island. Finally, Caliban finds that Stephano is neither a god nor Prospero's match and returns to Prospero's service.

This Shakespearian triangular relationship is analogous to the funding experiences of think-tanks in Nigeria. Funding is an issue every bit as highly politicised as the relationship between Prospero, Stephano and Caliban. The Prospero of government remains the largest source of funding yet think-tanks constantly seek independence from the state. Political interference is always the silent conditionality (to borrow Washington Consensus terminology) behind government funding. Despite this, like Caliban seeking to escape Prospero's domination in the belief that another source of funds would be less burdensome, Nigerian think-tanks tried to avoid government interference and control by seeking funding from other sources, particularly corporate and foreign donors. Especially during military rule they (most notably the private institutions), increasingly looked to overseas foundations and other foreign donors for funding.

Is this alternative relationship, like that between Caliban and Stephano, friendship, or is it a new thralldom? During military rule and to the chagrin of the rulers, private think-tanks in Nigeria received substantial financial support from international donor agencies, much of which was directed to research and advocacy work on human rights and democratisation. To the recipients their benefactors were friends of democracy, but for the military regimes, funding by external agencies was a Trojan horse and international agencies were seen as purveyors of a pernicious Western agenda to keep Nigeria in servitude, with recipients of such grants captive to this agenda.

Indeed, this charge is still common to discussions of external funding of think-tanks and NGOs in the developing world. External funding agencies are claimed to use domestic NGOs to pursue special interests that are sometimes harmful to society. 'Critics charge that funding sources can seriously affect NGO policy, making these organisations potentially the creatures of special interests. Such charges challenge NGO legitimacy especially when funds come from "outside" – including rich foreign governments, corporations or foundations'.⁶

Such criticisms have even come from within the African NGO community itself. According to Dawit Zawde, president of the relief agency African Humanitarian Action:⁷

Today's international aid system is skewed in favour of the Northern agenda and cannot respond adequately to the priorities of organisations in the South. Africa has long been depicted as a hopeless zone of conflict, famine and displacement that lacks capacity to respond adequately to crisis. This perception supports an aid paradigm that marginalises and erodes local capacity, casting African actors as sub-contractors to their international counterparts.

Sentiments such as this reflect a deep-seated discontent among local CSOs about their relations with funding agencies. They are generally resentful of the 'he who pays the piper

dictates the tune' attitude that is pervasive in the hierarchical culture of the 'donor-receiver' world. Seen in this light the donor has a programme into which the receiver must fit, the donor decides the terms of the receiver's work, whether as grantee, contractor or sub-contractor, and the receiver must always show gratitude to the donor.

A related charge during Nigeria's period of military rule claimed that donor funding was not development orientated. Instead, priorities reflected the fads, fancies and politics of programme officers and their superiors at the headquarters of the funding agencies. Such capriciousness distorts the development process, is supply- rather than demand-driven and serves only the interests of external forces. In the funding community, however, that approach was defended on the grounds that in the volatile context of military rule the overriding priority was to foster democracy. Consequently, diverse projects were funded concurrently to create a groundswell of opposition to military rule. Critics of external funding of domestic civil society organisations during military rule also argued that in reality it represented a limited transfer of resources to Nigeria because a good proportion of the funds went into paying Western 'experts' and buying equipment and services from Europe. For instance, the NGO co-financing budget line of the European Commission (EC) tied its grants to the procurement of EU-produced goods and services. When in April 2004 the EC circulated a proposed regulation on 'Access to Community External Assistance' designed to reverse this situation, many European NGOs rejected the idea.⁸

Finally, some critics of external funding of Nigerian think-tanks accuse donors of serving the wider interests of global neo-liberal forces by diffusing political anger and making the pill of neo-liberal economic policies easier to swallow. Arundhati Roy captures these misgivings when he characterises what he see as the real contribution of NGOs:⁹

They defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. NGOs alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims and blunt political resistance. NGOs form a buffer ... between [the] empire and its subjects. They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators. In the long run NGOs are accountable to their funders, not to the people they work among. They're what botanists would call an indicator species. The greater the devastation caused by neo-liberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs. Nothing illustrates this more poignantly than the phenomenon of the US preparing to invade a country while simultaneously readying NGOs to clean up the resultant devastation.

The romance between external funding bodies and think-tanks hit a rough patch with the end of military rule in Nigeria in 1999. Increasingly, Caliban and Stephano have gone their separate ways in the subsequent years of civilian rule. To explain the dramatic changes in their funding policy mentioned earlier, foreign donors have charged think-tanks and NGOs in general with lack of accountability; an alternative plea is 'a review of priorities in the light of the return to democracy'. While private think-tanks see such sudden changes in funding priorities as a betrayal (especially where they have not been adequately consulted),¹⁰ donor agencies regard it as necessary for the growth of Nigerian democracy.

There are two major facets of the change in priorities. The first is a move from supporting only private think-tanks to funding public ones, and universities. Two principal

arguments are made to justify this shift. First, it is suggested that public institutions are more stable than many of their private counterparts and therefore are more likely to be accountable for their actions, provided they undertake necessary reforms. Secondly, it is often argued by donor agencies that it is necessary for deepening democracy to support government institutions, especially those dealing with rule of law and the protection of citizens' rights. Many private think-tanks contest both propositions, not least because years of support for government think-tanks have not in any way deepened democracy, as is clearly evidenced by the continued misuse of power by public officials, including attempts by former President Olusegun Obasanjo to extend his presidential term. Furthermore, government think-tanks are not necessarily more accountable and transparent than private institutions, given the former's lingering corruption and personalisation.

The second change is in the method of funding itself, where market-based approaches, such as bidding, contracting and sub-contracting, now predominate. Previously there were two main methods.

The first might be described as applicable to 'the usual suspects', whereby external agencies essentially fund reputable (for which read 'well-known') think-tanks on the basis that they have the track record and capacity to perform and that donors have a relatively long relationship with them. This approach, however, raises the chicken-and-egg dilemma: organisations cannot be funded because they are not well-known and they cannot become well-known if they are not funded.¹¹ Many private think-tanks argue also that this is 'straw man' logic, whereby funders create a straw man and then demolish it; and they criticise donors for failing to build the organisations' capacity and then blaming them for their lack of it. They point to the fact that most funding agencies support only projects and refuse to sustain capacity-building through institutional or core funding.

The second approach might be characterised as the 'muddling through' method: Donors act somewhat instinctively in choosing which think-tanks to support, which may include channelling funds to them through organisations they already know ('re-granting'). This method is justified on the grounds that under military governments it was not possible to carry out adequate due diligence processes before selecting recipients. Both these approaches should, however, be seen as the two extremes of a continuum. In practice, donor agencies often use different combinations of each.

All in all it is clear that a situation through which think-tanks would escape their subjection to the Prospero of government funding has not come about and in consequence they are looking increasingly to government for finance. Recently the Social Science Academy of Nigeria and other scientific academies submitted to the federal government a proposed basis for more sustainable funding. Similarly, many think-tanks that previously refused government grants, such as the Centre for Democracy and Development, have since worked with government funds on the APRM for Nigeria.

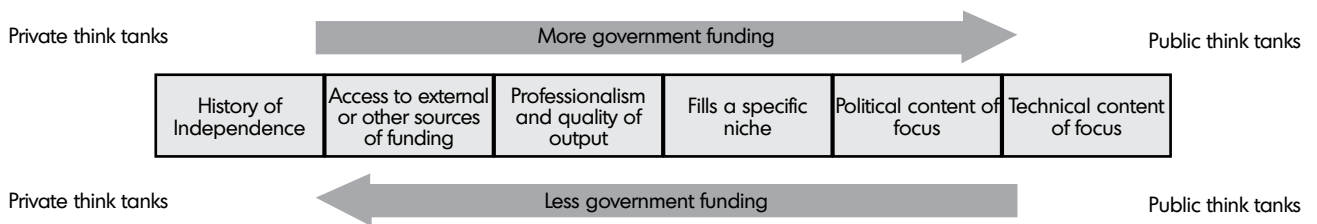
Payment and independence: The piper may refuse to play

It is often assumed that the funder dictates the tune to the beneficiary and that on becoming a government client, think-tanks necessarily curtail their criticism of the benefactor. While it may be true that he who pays the piper calls the tune, it should not be overlooked that the piper can refuse to play. It may be a general truth that think tanks ameliorate their criticisms of government if they receive funding from it but becoming a government client is not a sufficient condition for such conduct. In fact there are important intervening variables that determine this connection:

- Think tanks with a track record of independence, access to external or corporate funding and a professional approach, and those producing high-quality output, or work that fills a special niche, are unlikely to curtail their criticism in spite of their position as clients of government.
- Those which focus on material of a political and ideological nature are more vulnerable than others: the more political the content, the more likely it is that government will interfere in their work and that they will moderate their criticism.
- The more technical the focus of a think-tank's work, the less likely it is that government will interfere and that the institution will moderate its criticism.

The diagram below draws together these propositions. On the upper part of the continuum increased government funding moves in the direction of public think-tanks. On the lower part, less government interference and therefore more independence is experienced as the direction of funding moves from public to private think-tanks. The intervening variables that give rise to those conditions lie in the centre of the continuum.

The taxonomy of Nigeria's civil society organisations



CONCLUSIONS

This paper is exploratory in nature. Through the APRM process, many think-tanks have become clients of government. In setting out to analyse any relationship that might exist between think-tanks and government funding, it raises the issue of independence of institutions that enjoy a client relationship with government and investigates whether their capacity for objectivity in evaluating government performance on public policy issues is hampered by their status as clients of government. A transactional approach is necessary to understand the relationship between government and think-tanks, which in turn calls for analysis that is informed by a particular history and which examines the experiences of think-tanks in a specific country. Generalised, stylised views of the relationship, which suggest a clear and direct link between government support and the objectivity of think-tank output, are not necessarily wrong; but they are certainly inadequate.

ENDNOTES

1 For the purposes of this paper a 'think-tank' is defined as a research institute or organisation directed to the solution of complex problems, or to predict or plan future developments inter

alia in military, political and social affairs. A distinction should be drawn between private and public think-tanks. The latter are established and funded by government, while government does not statutorily fund the former. Both types evince varying degrees of independence from government. In Nigeria, public think-tanks include the Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), Ibadan and the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru, Jos.

- 2 The MacArthur Foundation is a private philanthropic institution set up in 1978 by John and Catherine MacArthur. John MacArthur developed and owned Bankers Life Casualty Company and other businesses, as well as considerable property in Florida and New York. The Foundation's resources are generated through private investments. The Foundation started making grants in Nigeria in 1989 and opened an office there in 1994. The initial mandate of the Foundation's bilateral agreement with the military government at the time limited its work to population and reproductive health. With return to civilian rule, however, the Foundation re-negotiated its bilateral agreement and expanded the scope of its work to include higher education, population and reproductive health, human rights, the Niger Delta, and conservation and sustainable development. Between 1994 and 2004 the Foundation's grants in Nigeria exceeded US\$14 million.
- 3 Gidron B, R Kramer, and L Salamon, *Government and the Third Sector: Emerging Relationships in Welfare States*, San Francisco, California: Jossey Bass, 1992.
- 4 Taylor M and J Lansley, 'Ideology and welfare in the UK: The implications for the voluntary sector', *Voluntas*, 3(2), 1992.
- 5 Kramer B, *Voluntary Agencies in the Welfare State*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1981 and Taylor M and A Bassi, 'Unpacking the state: the implications for the Third Sector of changing relationships between national and local government', *Voluntas*, 9(2), 1998.
- 6 <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/role/fundindx.htm>.
- 7 Cater N, 'African NGOs urge more aid through local agencies' <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/fund/2004/1221africangos.htm>
- 8 Haslam D, 'Untying aid and the NGO co-financing budget line' <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/fund/2004/1004untying.htm>
- 9 Roy A, 'Help that hinders' <http://www.globalpolicy.org/ngos/credib/2004/1104hinders.htm>
- 10 Not all funding agencies could be correctly charged with not consulting their local partners before changing funding priorities. The Foundations tend to be more decentralised and consultative in orientation than other international donor agencies. For instance, before the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation changed its funding priorities in the Niger Delta, there were widespread consultations with their partners in the Niger Delta before its Niger Delta Initiative was launched in 2002.
- 11 On the usual suspects approach, there are again differences among grant-making organisations. For instance, during the three years I was at the MacArthur Foundation, of the ten local organisations that my programmes funded, 60% had not received any previous funding from the Foundation.

More information about the project and contact details can be found at www.afrobarometer.org.

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