

The Role of Policy Alignment in Enhancing Research Collaboration in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Introduction

Alignment of policies across borders improves research processes allowing policymakers to access the latest research findings and expert insights. This enables the development of evidence-based policies that facilitates effective knowledge exchange, innovation, and resource sharing. However, several factors in Africa militate the smooth research collaboration across borders resulting in ineffective policies. Thus, the objective of this article is to advocate the role of policy alignment in enhancing research collaboration, focusing on how harmonized policies across regions, sectors, and institutions can facilitate effective knowledge exchange, innovation, and resource sharing. Additionally, the article will zoom into the importance of aligning intellectual property (IP) laws, funding mechanisms, ethical standards, and regulatory frameworks to create a cohesive environment for joint research initiatives. And, finally highlighting examples from international and regional bodies, with particular attention to Africa. The article adopted a Theory of Change (ToC); Theory of Change is an explicit theory of how and why it is thought that a social policy or program activities lead to outcomes and impacts. The Theory of Change will help stakeholders in policy alignment to have a visual representation of the change they anticipate and it will serves as a strong communication tool between stakeholders in undertaking research initiatives.

Methodology

The author employed a qualitative research approach to delve deeper on the issue of policy alignment as a catalyst for strengthening research collaboration. Through a qualitative approach, secondary data was collected, relevant documents were analyzed as well as a review of previous studies through desk reviews.

Results

The findings revealed that, research engagement in some African countries have yielded some positive policy outcomes. The research conducted under the fish trade project; addressing information gap through interdisciplinary research, informing and strengthening policy and regulatory framework alerted the national government and regional stakeholder to create space for policy dialogue. An independent review of the project found that “government officials in Malawi and Zambia indicated that research from the project had completely changed their perception of the scale, importance and issues faced by informal fish trade, and would inform policy development”. The independent review reported that research was put in the hands of policy champions, which enabled them to more effectively advocate for national reforms to support the intent of the regional policy framework adopted by the African Union.

Conclusions/recommendations

In order to ensure increased cooperation, shared resources, and reciprocal benefits in the global research community, the article explores into how policies that are matched across institutions and regions can help break down obstacles to research collaboration. To bridge the gap, the author recommends that private sector, governments, and the academic institutions works together to synchronize research policies and adopt regional policy bodies that will facilitate policy alignment.

Keywords: Policies, Policy alignment, Research collaboration, Africa

INTRODUCTION - ROLE OF POLICY ALIGNMENT

In today's globalized world, marked by heightened connectivity between nations and intricate developmental challenges, it is widely agreed that research collaborations becomes a requisite to knowledge production contributing to national and global solutions. Research collaboration as a social process Kraut et al., (1988) as cited by Cerdeira et al., (2023) which implies physical proximity, permits more frequent, effective and unplanned face-to-face communication (Sommer, 1959 as cited by Cerdeira et al., 2023).

There is little cooperation among African nations, especially when compared to partnerships with more developed regions such as Europe, Asia, and America. This emphasizes how urgently the continent needs to grow and work together. Therefore, improving intra-African collaboration is essential because it provides a platform for exchanging knowledge regarding various projects, increasing overall gains and cultivating sustainable connections across initiatives, people, and organizations.

One way to achieve development in a country is through shared ideas that originates from research collaborations. Thus, establishing a mutual relationship between researchers and policymakers is essential for effective policy development; this process relies on close communication and exchange. Policy makers could make more constructive use of research and researchers could communicate their findings more effectively to influence policy (Court and Young; 2006). Alignment of policies across borders improves research processes allowing policymakers to access the latest research findings and expert insights (Oliver, et al, 2014). This enables the development of evidence-based policies that facilitates effective knowledge exchange, innovation, and resource sharing. However, several factors in Africa militate the smooth research collaboration across borders resulting in ineffective policies.

According to Ilhami, (2023), stated that policy networks have a very important role in the policy process because they enable the formation of close connections between various actors and institutions involved in policy making. Through the use of this network, various stakeholders can interact with each other, share information and work together in formulating comprehensive and sustainable policies. With policy alignment in place, the policy formulation process can be more inclusive and responsive to the needs of the region, sectors, governments, and sub-national governments in Africa. The article adopted a Theory of Change (ToC); Theory of Change is an explicit theory of how and why it is thought that a social policy or program activities lead to outcomes and impacts (Mayne, 2017). The Theory of Change will help stakeholders in policy alignment to have a visual representation of the change they anticipate and it will serves as a strong communication tool between stakeholders in undertaking research initiatives. Developing theory of change is an effective way to align programmes efforts around well-defined pathways to impact and can be used to promote coherence in activities and goals says (Aslanyan et al., 2024).

According to Khomsi et al., (2024) as cited by Bednarek, et al., (2018) collaboration and communication allow for a better comprehension of the respective needs, constraints, and priorities of both groups. According to Bednarek, et al., (2018), stated that these understanding builds trust and constructive exchange of knowledge, leading to more informed and inclusive policy decisions through the identification of missing elements in the research-policy interface to overcome potential challenges and limitations, while enhancing

policy relevance and effectiveness. Similarly, Tijssen et al., (2018) stated that the policy goal is to encourage or foster research that, ultimately, will generate positive socioeconomic impacts and benefits.

Factors that militate effective research collaboration in africa

Historically, research within African countries was predominantly conducted by researchers from the Global North, often involving brief periods of fieldwork without establishing long-term collaborations (Dine, 2024).

African researchers contribute significantly to knowledge advancement and the direction of science, but they frequently encounter a number of obstacles that limit their visibility and influence. To address specific African issues, science and technology had to be developed and used. One may argue that doing locally relevant research on African socioeconomic issues is more important than publishing research articles in highly regarded, peer-reviewed worldwide scholarly journals.

In Africa, a wide gap exists between the producers and consumers of knowledge, and research could have a greater impact on development policy than it has had to date (Jones, 2021). As claim by Khomsi et al., (2024) stated that policymakers often face challenges when making decisions on complex issues without relying on evidence to help them make informed and objective choices. Instead, they might rely on political considerations, which can impact the decision-making process and potentially lead to less effective policies. According to Court and Young, (2006) alluded that policy processes are complex, multidimensional and unpredictable and there is an urgent need to find mechanisms to promote the use of research-based and other forms of evidence in development policy. If more were understood about the context within which researchers, policy makers and stakeholders are working, if the links between them were improved, and if high quality research were disseminated more effectively, then better policy making might follow.

According to Mouton, (2018) as cited by Kunert et al., (2020) indicated that the establishment of sustainable scientific partnerships with African colleagues is often challenging. This can be due to many factors, such as political instability and civil wars, colonial scientific legacies; structural adjustments and economic decline, together with a continuation of brain drain that are beyond the control of the immediate partners.

Furthermore, Mouton (2018) stated that lack of research funding is one of the factors that hinders the effective research collaboration. According to Kunert et al., (2020) in their article reported that the Governmental investments in research and development (R&D) expressed as proportion of gross domestic product across Africa averages between 0.2% and 0.3%. This low investment in R&D makes African scientists highly dependent on foreign funding to support research activities (Mouton, 2018). This funding is often skewed by the investors interest (i.e., mostly toward health—and agricultural related fields) rather than the needs of the local communities and researchers. Inadequate funding has negative impacts on the quantity and quality of research outputs because it results in a lack of infrastructural support, minimal access to new technologies and hence, the low novelty and competitiveness of outputs, which in turn leads to poor publication records and limited access to scientific journals (Langer et al., 2004). Supported by Enhanced Education Group in their article (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024) highlighted the issue of foreign funding were it stated that research funding allocated to Africa often comes from Western sources, but it is channeled through intermediaries, leaving only a small portion for local African researchers. Consequently, the funds left are insufficient to solve local issues effectively. This unequal distribution of resources not only limits African researchers but also diverts attention from addressing Africa’s unique problems in favour of global or Western priorities. According to Kunert et al., (2020) indicated that financial models differ between institutions but many universities and other organizations in Africa do not have the financial means to absorb and/or support research for interim periods for example while awaiting the release of funding. Such factors slow down the production of deliverables and result in conflicts in due dates/expectations Kunert et al., (2020).

Furthermore, Kunet et al., (2020) stated that the absence of well-developed science and technology infrastructure can pose a major challenge to the establishment and maintenance of long-term scientific

partnerships in Africa. Only few African countries (e.g., South Africa), have appropriate science and technology infrastructure with sufficient resources to equip labs and provide scientists with the necessary support to establish successful scientific partnerships. According to UNESCO, (2015) asserts that in Africa, most of the national Science and Technology systems are at an early stage of development and the low availability of resources does not allow for rapid scaling up of these systems.

Kunert et al., (2020). Similarly, (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024) is of the same view that there is limited regional research infrastructure; thus indicated that The African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), with its regional office in Dakar, Senegal, has established a presence in 35 African countries. Additionally, it has an office in Nairobi, Kenya. Despite such initiatives, there is still insufficient infrastructure to support large-scale research collaborations across Africa, limiting the potential for regional research integration and progress. According to UNESCO, (2016) is of the view that under-performing and ill-prepared education systems are an additional hurdle for some African scientists.

Mukhwana et al., (2024) in their article highlighted that procurement challenges are impairing science education in Africa and contribute to academic emigration from the continent. Further, Mukhwana et al., (2024) stated that Africa has the lowest share of researchers globally (~2.4%) and its brightest talents are choosing to relocate to ‘greener pastures’ with more timely access to research funding and supplies. Researchers returning to Africa from the diaspora often cite procurement issues as a stumbling block to their re-establishment on the continent (Mukhwana et al., 2024). Another key hindering factor raised by Mukhwana et al., (2024) is that researchers in Africa face frequent exchange-rate fluctuations which affects or limit their purchasing power. This issue is worsen when is costed in local currencies but lab supplies are purchase in foreign currency. Often this difference is not factored in the budgets, which means researchers are forced to find ways to reduce costs elsewhere. There is also a lack of affordable service contracts for equipment maintenance and repair in many regions of Africa, which leads to equipment malfunctioning or falling into disrepair.

According to the (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024) stated that there are numerous challenging factors that hinders research potential, technological advancement and overall socioeconomic development. The article further stated that regardless of global attention, Africa continues to fall behind in critical areas such as policy-making, innovation and the application of research outcomes. The article pinpointed on the following key issues hindering African research:

Lagging Behind Global Standards

In many areas, Africa is struggling to keep pace with the rest of the world. Whether in education, technology, or health, the continent’s development is significantly behind. This gap in progress not only reflect the limited resources but also structural inefficiencies, corruption, and the external influences shaping its policies and economies (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024).

The Translation Gap

The article “Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, (2024) also pointed out that one major issue is the time it takes to translate research into actionable policies, products, or social interventions. On average, it takes around 14 years for research findings to be applied in a practical context. This translation gap delays much-needed innovations and solutions that could address pressing societal challenges, such as health crises, food insecurity, and climate change adaptation.

Ineffective Utilization of Research

Only about 30% of academic publications in Africa lead to societal benefits, with 70% of research only circulating within academic or scientific circles. Most publications serve only to boost academic citations rather than produce meaningful changes in policy or society. This insular approach to research has slowed

the potential for scientific breakthroughs to positively impact African communities (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024).

Researcher’s Detachment from Society

A key aspect is noticed, that many African researchers are shielded from the practical problems affecting society. Academia, in many ways, functions like an isolated “researcher’s club,” where the focus is on academic recognition rather than solving local societal problems. This disconnect limits the relevance and applicability of their work to the real challenges facing African communities (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024).

Inequitable Distribution of Grants

Another key hindering factor pointed out is that the The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation allocates around \$2 billion in grants for African projects. However, about 50% of this funding ends up going to US-based institutions, leaving African institutions underfunded. This discrepancy exacerbates existing trust issues and fosters a dependency on external institutions to lead research on African problems rather than building local capacity (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024).

Poor Representation in Global Knowledge Systems

It is stated that, Africa produces a significant amount of research, but it is underrepresented in global databases and citations. For instance, Africa has around 2,700 academic journals, but only 7% of these are indexed in SCOPUS, a global database that tracks research output. Similarly, only 7% of African journals are cited in Science Direct, and 37% in Google Scholar. If African research is not indexed in global databases, it remains invisible to the world’s knowledge production systems, preventing African voices from influencing global science (“Problems Facing African Research and Innovation”, 2024).

Importance of aligning policies (governance)

When policies are aligned there is clarity in decision-making as well as consistency and efficiency. Thus, it helps institution and organizations to hold onto a unified direction, avoiding conflicts, and streamline operations making it easier for them to achieve goals. African countries should be aware that policies that are not coordinated can lead to misunderstanding, impede advancement and weaken accountability. Therefore, alignment promotes coherence, teamwork, and sustained performance.

Various authors in Africa have deliberated on the issue of policy alignment. According to Kunert et al., (2020) stated that participating institutions must have the capacity to provide the required infrastructure, as well as the essential equipment, laboratories and facilities and legal frameworks required to realize successful scientific partnerships.

According to Cerdeira et al., (2023) in their paper posits that governance is important from several perspectives; and they have highlighted the significance of governance as follows. Firstly, political instability, corruption and violence prevent an attractive research environment (Allard et al., 2012 as cited by Cerdeira et al., 2023); thus with good governance in place it will smoothen research collaboration. Also, the degree of freedom influences the ability to engage and conduct activities (Schiermeier, 2021; Skupien & Rufn, 2020 as cited by Ceideira et al., 2023). Further, the quality and complexity of policy formulation and implementation regarding intellectual property and legal infrastructures may pose additional challenges to the collaborative process (Forero-Pineda, 2006 as cited by Cerdeira et al., 2023). Therefore, rules and laws as formal institutions influence the behaviour of actors and organizations (Boschma, 2005 as cited by Cerdeira et al., 2023); to the extent that actors and organizations (including universities and other research entities) share similar formal institutions, i.e. build trust on the basis of common institutions, this proximity leads to increased International Research Collaboration (Boschma, 2005 as cited by Cerdeira et al., 2023). Many

African countries have undertaken reforms to improve their overall governance. Nevertheless, there are countries where these reforms are still in their infancy and have a long way to go to achieve good performance, and others are experiencing a decline in their governance performance after periods of improvement (Mbaku, 2020; MIF, 2020 as cited by Ceidera et al., 2023).

According to de-Graft Aikins, et al. (2012) in their case study of UK-Africa Academic Partnership on Chronic Disease identified five key factors that are required to sustain research partnership. The factors are as follows:

Social Capital: this is basically when partners build and develop their relationship, networks and are having a common understanding of norms and values that eventually leads to trust and collaboration.

Measurable goals: Goals set between partners should clear, realistic and obtainable in order to monitor and evaluate the relationships between inputs, outputs and outcomes.

Creative and innovative strategies: It is stated that it is wise to pool resources together and create a platform of openness to new ways of doing things.

Funding: The authors pointed out that if partners want to propel from one stage to another funding is required.

The above-mentioned factors are elements that will serve as a platform for Africa to consider in order for them to sustain a long lasting research partnership within the continent.

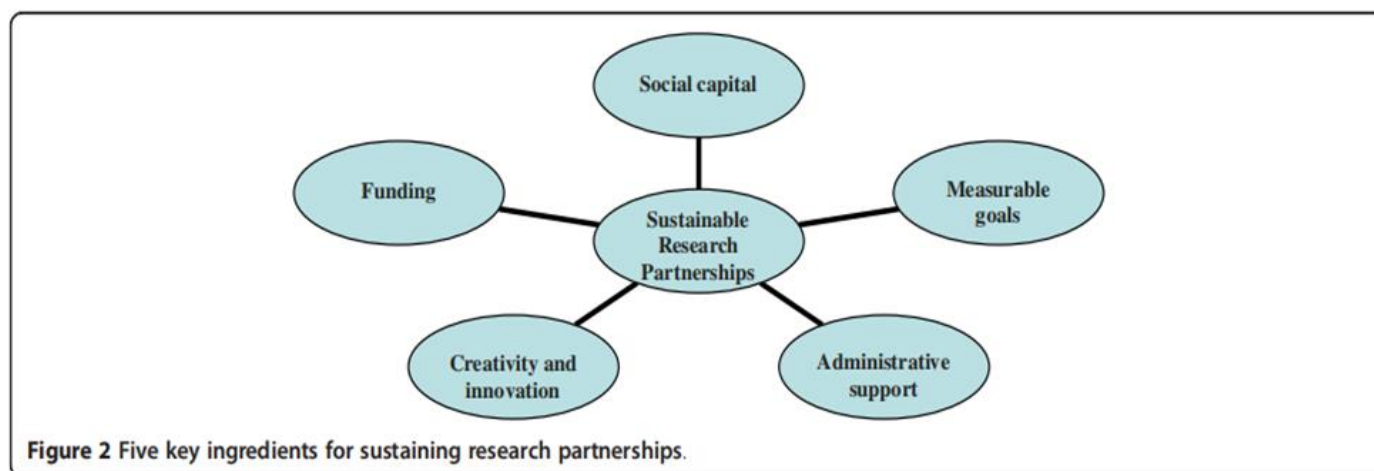


Figure 1 :- Five key ingredients for sustaining research activity (Sourced from de-Graft Aikins et al., 2012, Journal of Globalisation and Health, Vol. 8, p.29).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The objective of the article is to advocate the role of policy alignment in enhancing research collaboration, focusing on how harmonized policies across regions, sectors, and institutions can facilitate effective knowledge exchange, innovation and resource sharing. Thus, the researcher employed a qualitative method approach, adopting a qualitative method approach makes the results more reliable and strengthens the validity of the conclusions made.

Secondary data was sourced from extensive desk reviews from previous studies/articles and content analyses of several documentary materials. The author started off by gathering, studying and critically analyzing the present-day literature. Similarly, relevant literature and documents were selected based on their publication date 2012-2024, relevant to the research topic, and credibility of the sources.

The author presented in detail the information gathered to reveal an authentic results and findings. The interpreted data are not meant to be generalized but rather informative, as is customary with qualitative research designs. The results have potential to be relevant for policy makers, researchers and various stakeholders in Africa.

RESULTS

Evidence shows that to realize new discoveries and advances on the African continent, African researchers should work together, exchange knowledge and ideas.

As per the findings, research engagement in some African countries has yielded some positive policy outcomes. The research conducted under the fish trade project; addressing information gap through interdisciplinary research, informing and strengthening policy and regulatory framework alerted the national government and regional stakeholder to create space for policy dialogue. An independent review of the project found that “government officials in Malawi and Zambia indicated that research from the project had completely changed their perception of the scale, importance and issues faced by informal fish trade, and would inform policy development”. The independent review went on to report that research was put in the hands of policy champions, which enabled them to more effectively advocate for national reforms to support the intent of the regional policy framework adopted by the African Union. Such cooperation can leverage similarities in various contexts facilitating easier movement of people and resources and driving collective advancement in Africa research and development. According to Khomsi et al. (2004) stated that researchers and policymakers in some African countries have shown successful collaboration in tobacco control, knowledge transitions and financial support to establish legislation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In today's globalized world, marked by heightened connectivity between nations and intricate developmental challenges, it is widely agreed that research collaborations becomes a requisite to knowledge production contributing to national and global solutions. There is little cooperation among African nations, especially when compared to partnerships with more developed regions such as Europe, Asia, and America. African researchers contribute significantly to knowledge advancement and the direction of science, but they frequently encounter a number of obstacles that limit their visibility and influence. One way to achieve development in a country is through shared ideas that originates from research collaborations. In order to ensure increased cooperation, shared resources, and reciprocal benefits in the global research community, the article explored how policies that are matched across institutions and regions can help break down obstacles to research collaboration. To bridge the gap, the author recommends that private sector, governments, and the academic institutions works together to synchronize research policies and adopt regional policy bodies that will facilitate policy alignment.

It is further recommended that African countries should develop policies and change their practices, adopt advanced technological tools, train and develop human capital. For policies to successful fulfill their mandate, communication, translation, and interaction and exchange should be key. African countries should fortify their collaboration with national think tanks and policy research organizations that will facilitate knowledge creation, knowledge generation, knowledge management and knowledge utilization that firmly establishes ownership at the national level. According Mukhwana et al. (2024), also suggested that coordination between African institutions with shared research interests and within approximate geographical regions would also be useful, as they can share best practices, reduce shipping and customs-clearance costs and give institutions better bargaining power with manufacturers to reduce processing time-frames and product prices.

The ultimate objective should be to establish a research environment that is sensitive to regional demands, recognizes and rewards significant contributions, and enables African researchers to take the lead in addressing the most important issues facing the continent.

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