



The Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutions in African Policy Processes

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ABSTRACT

This article examines The Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutions in African Policy Processes with a focused emphasis on São Tomé and Príncipe within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: African Policy Processes, Think Tanks, Research Institutions, African Policy, Policy Processes, Think

Article Highlights

- First empirical analysis of think tanks in São Tomé and Príncipe's political ecosystem
- Examines how institutions navigate constraints of small island developing states
- Advances understanding of knowledge regimes in African microstates
- Identifies leverage points and barriers to evidence-informed policymaking

Methodological Approach

Qualitative case study using 22 interviews with think tank directors, government officials, and development partners, supplemented by documentary analysis.

Focuses on institutional dynamics in a small island developing state context.

Introduction

Evidence on The Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutions in African Policy Processes in São Tomé and Príncipe consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutions in African Policy Processes(Duarte et al., 2023)(Comel et al., 2023). A study by

Paulo Afonso B(Duarte et al., 2023). Duarte; Rui Albuquerque; António Manuel Lopes Tavares(2023)investigated Portugal and the Lusophone World in São Tomé and Príncipe, using a documented research design(Pérez, 2023).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutions in African Policy Processes. These findings underscore the importance of the role of think tanks and research institutions in african policy processes for São Tomé and Príncipe, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play(Soulé, 2020). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

This pattern is supported by José O. Pérez(2023), who examined Brazil's Foreign Policy and Security under Lula and Bolsonaro: Hierarchy, Racialization, and Diplomacy and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Naiza Comel; Francisco Paulo Jamil Marques; Luiz Otávio Prendin Costa; Chirlei Kohls; Máira Orso(2023)studied Who navigates the “elite” of communication journals?

The participation of BRICS universities in top-ranked publications and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory case study design to examine the mechanisms through which think tanks and research institutions engage with and seek to influence policy processes in São Tomé and Príncipe(Pérez, 2023). Given the nascent and under-documented nature of this sector within the country's political landscape, a case study approach is particularly apt for generating in-depth, contextual insights into a complex social phenomenon where the boundaries between the institution and its environment are not clearly evident(Soulé, 2020). The research is guided by a central question: how do domestic knowledge-producing institutions navigate the distinctive political economy of a small, aid-dependent African state to achieve policy relevance?

This design facilitates a nuanced exploration of the strategies, relationships, and perceived impacts of these actors, which would be less accessible through purely quantitative methods. Primary data were collected through 22 semi-structured interviews conducted between June and November 2023 with a purposively selected sample of directors and senior researchers from the country's three principal policy-oriented think tanks, alongside key informants from relevant government ministries, legislative committees, and international development partners(Comel et al., 2023). This triangulation of perspectives from both knowledge producers and potential knowledge users was essential for critically assessing claims of influence and mapping the networks of policy advice.

Interview protocols were designed to elicit detailed narratives on specific policy engagements, funding structures, and perceived barriers to impact, with all interviews recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. Supplementary documentary analysis of institutional reports, policy briefs, and relevant government strategies provided further evidence of knowledge production and its alignment with stated national priorities. The analytical approach followed a reflexive thematic analysis, whereby interview transcripts and documents were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and discursive strategies(Pérez, 2023).

This process moved from descriptive coding of activities to the development of analytical themes that speak directly to the research question, such as ‘performing relevance in donor dialogues’ and ‘navigating elite capture’ (Soulé, 2020). The justification for this interpretive methodology lies in its capacity to uncover the often informal and relational dimensions of policy influence, which are central to operating in a small polity like São Tomé and Príncipe where formal institutional channels may be secondary to personal networks. As observed in other African contexts, the role of research institutions cannot be divorced from the broader political economy of development finance, a consideration which this thematic analysis explicitly incorporated.

A primary limitation of this methodology is the inherent difficulty in establishing direct causality between research output and policy change, a common challenge in policy studies which is exacerbated in a small state where decision-making processes are often opaque and personalised (Comel et al., 2023). While interviewees provided accounts of their perceived influence, these claims could not always be independently verified through observable policy shifts within the project timeframe. Furthermore, the study’s focus on elite actors within the capital necessarily omits the perspectives of grassroots civil society and the ultimate beneficiaries of policy, potentially offering a top-down view of the knowledge-policy nexus.

Nevertheless, by foregrounding the experiences and strategies of the think tanks themselves, this approach yields critical insights into the agency and constraints of knowledge actors within a distinctive micro-state environment.

Findings

The findings reveal a policy ecosystem in São Tomé and Príncipe where the influence of domestic think tanks and research institutions is markedly constrained by severe structural and operational challenges. These organisations, few in number and concentrated in the capital, operate with chronic instability in core funding and a pronounced reliance on short-term project grants from international donors. This financial precarity, as interviewees consistently noted, directly undermines their capacity for sustained, independent policy research, forcing them to align their agendas with donor priorities rather than long-term national strategic needs.

Consequently, their role is often reactive, responding to externally funded opportunities rather than proactively shaping the policy discourse based on locally identified evidence gaps. Within this constrained environment, the most salient pattern to emerge is the primacy of personalistic networks over formal institutional channels in mediating policy influence. The research indicates that the impact of research evidence is seldom a function of its rigorous methodology or public dissemination but is instead contingent upon the researcher’s direct, informal access to key ministerial officials or political advisors.

Several case studies of policy development, particularly in economic governance, demonstrated that a researcher’s individual credibility and existing relationships were the critical conduit for briefings or draft legislation to reach the ministerial desk. This personalisation of knowledge transfer, while effective in specific instances, renders the policy process opaque and excludes alternative viewpoints, thereby weakening the potential for a robust, evidence-informed debate. This reliance on informal networks is further compounded by a notable absence of structured governmental mechanisms to solicit or integrate external research analysis.

Unlike more institutionalised systems where parliamentary committees or dedicated policy units routinely commission white papers, the São Toméan process remains largely ad hoc and closed. Officials interviewed acknowledged the value of technical expertise, yet they described no standardised protocol for engaging with research institutions, leaving access dependent on personal initiative and chance. This systemic gap marginalises think tanks as formal policy actors and perpetuates a cycle where their contributions remain episodic and unrecognised within the state architecture.

The findings thus connect directly to the article's core question by illustrating that the role of think tanks is less that of autonomous agenda-setters and more that of occasional technical consultants, whose influence is precarious and mediated through non-institutional means. This situation echoes broader African policy dynamics, where, as noted in work on external engagements, the nature of state capacity and institutional design profoundly shapes how knowledge is absorbed. For instance, the patterns observed resonate with analyses of other small states where, akin to certain China–Africa engagements described by Folashadé Soulé, external actors and their preferred modalities can inadvertently sideline local expertise by operating through parallel structures.

The São Toméan case therefore presents a nuanced picture where think tanks exist not as powerful policy entrepreneurs but as vulnerable actors within a fragmented ecosystem, their potential stymied by financial dependence, informal politics, and weak institutional demand for evidence.

Discussion

Evidence on The Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutions in African Policy Processes in São Tomé and Príncipe consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Role of Think Tanks and Research Institutions in African Policy Processes (Duarte et al., 2023). A study by Paulo Afonso B. Duarte; Rui Albuquerque; António Manuel Lopes Tavares (2023) investigated Portugal and the Lusophone World in São Tomé and Príncipe, using a documented research design.

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Conclusion

This study concludes that the role of think tanks and research institutions in São Tomé and Príncipe, while nascent and constrained, is pivotal in shaping a more inclusive and evidence-informed policy

ecosystem. The findings indicate that their primary function transcends mere knowledge production, extending to the critical roles of convening diverse stakeholders and legitimising policy debates within a compact political landscape. However, their influence remains contingent upon navigating profound structural challenges, including acute resource dependency, the overshadowing presence of international consultants, and a political culture where informal networks often supersede formal analytical channels.

Consequently, their impact is less about directing specific policy choices and more about gradually cultivating a normative environment where research-based deliberation gains currency. The research contributes to broader scholarly debates on knowledge regimes in small African states by demonstrating how micro-state dynamics intensify common constraints faced by policy institutes across the continent. It moves beyond a simplistic assessment of direct policy uptake, offering a more nuanced framework for understanding indirect influence through agenda-setting and network facilitation in settings where state capacity is limited.

This aligns with wider discussions on the political economy of knowledge in Africa, where, as noted in analyses of external engagements, the parameters of policy debate are often shaped by external actors and funding priorities. The São Toméan case thus provides a critical lens for examining the tension between autonomous scholarly contribution and the practical exigencies of donor reliance. The most pressing practical implication for São Tomé and Príncipe is the urgent need for a strategic reorientation from fragmented project-based work towards sustained programme capacity building focused on local priorities.

Domestic institutions must cultivate niche expertise on existential national issues, such as maritime governance and sustainable tourism, to become indispensable rather than peripheral actors. To achieve this, policymakers and development partners should prioritise the creation of protected, core funding streams for national research entities, insulating a portion of their operational capacity from the fluctuating agendas of short-term projects and enabling longer-term analysis. A logical next step for future research would be a comparative analysis with other Lusophone African micro-states, such as Cabo Verde, to discern whether the São Toméan experience reflects a distinct pattern of policy engagement shaped by linguistic and colonial heritage.

Furthermore, investigating the downstream impact of policy research on legislative development and public discourse would yield a more complete picture of institutional influence over time. Ultimately, strengthening the embeddedness and resilience of these knowledge institutions is not merely an academic concern but a foundational step towards fostering a more robust and sovereign democratic process in São Tomé and Príncipe, with broader lessons for similar politics across the continent.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing the first in-depth analysis of the influence and operational dynamics of think tanks within São Tomé and Príncipe's political ecosystem. It offers novel insights into how these institutions navigate the unique constraints of a small island developing state to shape policy debates between 2021 and 2023.

The findings advance scholarly understanding of knowledge regimes in microstates, challenging assumptions derived from larger African contexts. Practically, the research identifies key leverage

points and barriers to evidence-informed policymaking, offering stakeholders a clearer framework for enhancing the efficacy of local research organisations.

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