

**UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA  
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, HUMAN RESOURCES AND  
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DIVISION**



## **Senior Policy Workshop**

# **Enhancing the Interface Between Government Policy and Decision-Making Entities and Research/Training Institutions in Support of Economic Reform and Development in Africa**

**THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN POLICY MAKERS AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS:  
THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT**

By  
**Abdala S. Bujra  
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**Organized by**

**The Public Administration, Human Resources and Social Development Division, within the framework of the Special Action Programme for Administration and Management in Africa Regional Project (SAPAM), in collaboration with the Ministry of Administrative Affairs, Prime Minister's Office, Kingdom of Morocco**

**(Rabat, Morocco, 21-25 September 1992)**

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# THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN POLICY MAKERS AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA : THE HISTORICAL AND SOCIO\_POLITICAL CONTEXT

## Introduction

The relationship between African policy makers and university -based research and training institutions has historically oscillated, between different phases of consent, mutual suspicion and confrontation. Though funded by governments, these institutions have tended to resent certain measures of government intervention as outright intrusion and infringement upon their autonomy, a precious gain brought about by the struggle for independence. However, a realization has, over time, dawned on both parties of the necessity for constructive "interaction" in order to achieve common and cherished societal goals. The recognition of the invaluable contribution of research-based knowledge to development endeavours<sup>1/</sup>, by both governments and international organizations, prompted an African concern to revisit the state of interaction between policy makers and researchers.<sup>2/</sup> However, the status of this interaction remains far from being unblemished as attested to by the observed dilapidation of the indigenous research institutions and the increasing reliance of African governments on expatriates and foreign-based consultancy firms. Paradoxically, these very facts have made the issue, of the dialogue between policy makers and university academics, more relevant and topical than ever before.

This paper attempts to examine the relationship between government's decision makers and university academics as it has historically evolved, in various phases, within the particular African socio-political context. Our proposed thesis is that, it is only within this context that we can grasp the substantive

issues involved in this relationship and fully understand and appreciate the current unsatisfactory status, constraints and prospects of the interaction between policy makers and researchers.<sup>3/</sup> We will also propose some suggestions to improve this status to fit the new realities of the 1990s.

## **I. The 1960s : The Decade of Euphoria and Consensus**

By the 1960s, the majority of African countries were able to put an end to colonial rule. The national governments which assumed power on the eve of independence had invariably entertained specific opinions and held certain perceptions of university academics. A small group of African scholars returning from Europe and North America at that time, together with foreign advisors and donors, played a role in the organization of research, training and the production of knowledge, though it was the governments' views which were predominant and which finally prevailed.<sup>4/</sup> Thus, while monopolizing the domains of policy and decision-making, the governments assigned definite roles to universities and their academics researchers;

1) Universities were regarded as training institutions to produce higher level manpower to fill administrative posts in the civil service and parastatals and to assist in running the management of private business.

2) University staff and intellectuals were primarily thought of as nationalists, and were not only expected, but obliged and duty-bound, to rationalize the policies of their respective national governments and to lend support to their efforts at preserving national unity. Transcending the boundaries of their prescribed obligations amounted to treachery and a non-patriotic attitude. The governments considered independent initiatives by the intellectuals on such issues to be divisive as

initiatives by the intellectuals on such issues to be divisive as well as politically and morally offensive.

3) Research was relegated to a secondary position and merely seen as an instrument for carrying out two defined functions; a) to provide the necessary technical input for the design of macro and sectoral economic policies and the formulation of development projects to improve export agriculture and pastoralism; and b) to restore the glory of African history which the colonialists had distorted and misinterpreted, on the one hand, and to revive the glorious indigenous African culture which was again ridiculed and degraded by the colonizers. The parameters for the process of glorification of both African history and culture were, however, defined by the ruling elites.

To maintain this schema of allocating the responsibilities between the decision-making entities and the university academics and intellectuals, African governments soon embarked on the creation of the relevant structures which, though varied from one country to another, incorporated the following;

1) Universities and other higher learning institutes had the general purpose of training. These institutions, however, came under a relatively lighter form of government control.

2) Institutes of Public Administration were for training employees who occupied the higher echelons of the civil service.

3) African Studies Institutes for the production of African history and culture through research into tribal histories, languages and the collection of material and oral ethnographies.

4) Institutes of Development Studies(IDS) for conducting economic research to technically feed the government's macro and sectoral plans.

Ironically, this rather idealistic conception, or division of labour, was largely accepted by the non-ruling elite including the academics. Thus, these structures built by the governments were gradually consolidated and the elite consensus was eventually cultivated, nurtured and held throughout the 1960s, except in some countries which started to witness political upheavals by the 2nd half of the decade e.g. Ghana, Uganda, Sudan and Nigeria. Reaching such a consensus was further facilitated by the small size of the academic community, in the first place, and their relatively affluent standard of living and style of life which set them apart as an indulgent and privileged group undistinguishable from their ruling counterparts.

However, there were two undercurrents, which were simultaneously unfolding, by the late 1960s which gnawed at the heart of this consensus and ultimately led to its complete erosion during the 1970s;

1) The penetration of the higher echelons of the civil service and various departments of the public sector by foreign experts and the subsequent increasing dependence on them and reliance on their services. This unwarranted infiltration infuriated, and was resented by, the national academics who strongly aspired to effectively contribute to formulating government policies.

2) The increasing protest movements and strikes staged by the university students. Though these violent overtures were

articulated over seemingly mundane issues and petty demands, such as food, grants, accommodation etc, they were couched in political terms critical to the overall government policies. These two developments portended the beginning of the end of the established consensus - between the governments and the academics/researchers at the universities.

## **II. The 1970s : Hostility and Conflict**

The socio-economic structure of the African countries had not remained stagnant during the 1960s to the effect that by the advent of the 1970s dramatic changes had already taken shape. A number of dominant characteristics of the emerging structure in the 1970s, punctuated by a general deepening economic crisis, were discernable;

1) The African state had evolved into a major instrument of wealth accumulation with an ever expanding bureaucratic machinery. The state, therefore, provided an arena for a fierce political struggle between the competing actions of the African elite. To achieve control and hegemony over state power, the respective groups of the elite, lacking an independent base of political support, resorted to the manipulation of ethnic ties and tribal affiliations.

2) Economic differentiation between the various social segments became more pronounced with a growing size of the middle class propelled by the expansion of educational opportunities, the increasing modernization of the economy and the accompanying proliferation of public and private sector employment. Thus, the non-ruling sections of the elite and the underprivileged socio-economic groups stepped up their demands and exerted pressures for more share in the political power.

2) Political divisions acquired a new dimension by becoming strongly structured in an ideological framework, and political programmes were articulated along lines of ideology.

Academics and intellectuals were caught up in the emerging divisions of the society and entangled in the heated political struggle so that they could no longer maintain the neutral stance defined for them by the government and which they accepted during the 1960s. Thus, while the government was increasingly regarding the academics with suspicion, the latter became highly fragmented and drifted apart, each group opting for a different path. The end result was that some entrenched themselves into administrative and political posts proffered by the government of the day, some became involved in the lucrative process of wealth accumulation, some were immersed in either the ethnic or ideological politics, some were lured away by the flourishing consultancy market, some emigrated to greener pastures, while very few remained "professional" academic staff and researchers.

These dramatic developments were accompanied by profound changes in the very structures established by the post-independence governments with the objective of performing the functions of training and research. These changes included, among others;

1) The frequent budgetary cuts and lack of research funds, poor teaching and physical infrastructures, have resulted in the observed dilapidation of universities and research institutions. The pertinent question might not, therefore be about the state of interaction between policy makers and research centres, but, under these appalling conditions, it is whether the quality of research produced by these institutions can possibly be satisfactory?.



2) It would seem that the university had already accomplished its mission and fulfilled its prescribed task of general training and flooded the government bureaucracy with an "oversupply" of graduates. In this respect, the universities, therefore, increasingly became unimportant in the eyes of the governments which, in many instances, had no qualms about closing them down for prolonged periods of time. A similar fate, though in a gentler manner, has afflicted Institutes of Public Administration.

3) Even the role of Institutes of Development Studies (IDS), which were originally created to assist the government bureaucrats in designing economic policies and development projects, has become less significant due to;

a) the inundation of the various government departments with expatriate experts; b) the lack of independent resources; c) the alleged failure of these centres to come up with real technical answers to the prevailing economic crisis; and d) the dominant role of donors in defining the research agenda and its direction.

4) The African Studies Institutes steadily became marginalized and the production of African history and culture was deemed no longer significant to the ruling elites.

5) The worldwide political struggle and ideological antagonism, at that time, between the ideals of socialism espoused by Marxism and percepts of liberalism championed by Western democracies, found its way to the university arena. Political discussions in class rooms, seminars, students and university politics and publications were all expressed in the

language of the then on-going hostility between the two camps and extended to engulf public debates and national politics. The academics and intellectuals were intimately involved in the ensuing struggle and were drawn into politics through respective professional associations and political organizations.

These protestations culminated into open critique of the government's socio-economic policies by the academic community and became widespread and common. The governments' reactions ranged between a further squeeze on university's resources and intimidation of the staff to their outright suppression. the governments, thus, developed the following conceptions of the academic community;

a) shirking their share of the responsibility, the governments saw the apparent overall deterioration of universities and higher learning institutions as a sign of the ineptitude of the academics and a proof of the uselessness of these institutions. Besides, decision makers in the government bureaucracy, aware of their vested economic interests, were suspicious of research motives of academics and, thus, denied them what they needed in terms of data, while expatriates were generously given access even to "classified" information. Thus, "the crisis situation which is partly rooted in the previous and present international division of labour, is frequently negotiated to the exclusion of local experts, and of course with the help of those would (equally) be held responsible for it"5/;

b) portrayed them as "traitors" and held them accountable for the disintegration of the elite consensus;

c) perceived the academic, across a wide political spectrum, as tools of foreign powers and often used the full state power to prosecute them.

### III. The 1980s : The Impasse : Interaction Stunted

The same socio-economic and political trends that had dominated the 1970s were well carried over to the 1980s, albeit in a larger magnitude and at faster pace. In the decade of the 1980s, the African continent faced a deep socio-economic crisis of unprecedented dimensions. The crisis was so pervasive and persistent that, in many instances, it threatened the very capacity of societies to reproduce themselves as viable entities. The root causes of the socio-economic crisis lie primarily in the structural imbalances and weaknesses of the African economies. The intensification of the crisis called for some forms of adjustment and recovery measures in nearly all African countries. Thus, by 1987, almost 60% of all African countries were implementing conventional Structural Adjustment Programmes(SAPs) supported by the International Monetary Fund(IMF) and the World Bank(WB).

The preoccupation of the African governments with the execution of SAP packages made them, however, more concerned with the day to day management of the macro-economy and fulfilling the programmes' targets stipulated by the IMF and the WB. The management of macro-economic, and sectoral policies, in some cases, was, thus, taken over by the experts of the two international institutions. Local researchers, particularly economists, were only sporadically invited to participate in negotiation processes.

This gloomy situation precipitated drastic effects for the already poor state of interaction between policy makers and research centres and had adverse impact on the potential contribution of indigenous research on economic reforms and development efforts. Some of these are;

- 1) The input of local research was considered irrelevant, and regarded as superfluous and unnecessary.

2) University-based training and research institutions continued to degenerate at all levels of activity. The severe cuts made in capital and recurrent expenditures completely paralysed the functioning of these already decaying institutions, and their rehabilitation became prohibitive for so many countries.

3) University academic, feeling at a loss, were dragged into various forms of survival strategies and increasing numbers gave up the pursuit of serious research, unrewarding as it has become. The 1980s witnessed a large influx of outmigration to the North, Arab Gulf countries and the "greener" pastures of Africa, While some took up assignments in the proliferating consultancy firms. The most unlucky, however, opted for overtime teaching or moonlighting in the private sector, to the extent of exhausting any time left for research, and remained to deal with a multitude of institutional, structural, organizational and resource-related constraints. University staff unions and associations vigorously drummed up their grievances of low pay and dwindling incomes, while the down played their earlier demands of improvement of the research and teaching infrastructures.

#### **Iv. The 1990s : The Turning Point: Would it be possible to resolve the Debacle ?**

A surge of optimism swept the African continent since the early beginnings of the this decade. The new climate produced the corollary opinion which predicted that both the economy and management of the African states would turn for the better by the 2nd half of the 1990s. This optimistic view has rested on three current developments;

1. The pronounced commitment of African governments to

restructuring their economies with emphasis on the preeminence of a more human centred approach, if any long-term structural transformation, and development, is to become a reality.<sup>6/</sup>

2. Economic management and capacity-building programmes which were introduced within an overall strategy of sustainable growth with equity. Capacity- building initiatives are concerned with human development, restructuring of public and private sectors, redressing the observed inefficiency of the public institutions and building up capacity particularly in policy analysis and formulation.<sup>7/</sup>

3. The transition to "democracy" and political "pluralism" has been depicted as the primary feature of the present stage in the evolution of African politics. It is, thus, hoped that, through democratization, African political culture will become conducive to the unfolding of a more "participatory" and stable system of governance with transparency and accountability and responsive to objective critique of public policies.

However, under these new circumstances, a pertinent question strongly poses itself; what kind of relationship should exist between research institutions and decision and policy making bodies? Our reaction to this might raise more questions than it would hope to answer. It would also be preposterous to prescribe modalities of a relationship, to fit these circumstances, regardless of the specificity of each country situation. Though, we believe that it would be possible, through continuous and sustained dialogue between academic and decision makers and the creation of the appropriate forums for communication, to arrive at a framework within which a positive "state of interaction" can be realized.

However, for the purpose of this meeting, a number of suggestions can be proposed;

1. Given the new climate of market economy and democratic pluralism, the needs of the government with regard to research and training are most likely to be different from those of a command economy and interventionist state. If these new needs are clarified, the academics are most likely to respond positively and to help the governments.

2. There is an urgent need for a serious reform of the educational system and all institutions of higher learning and research to make them more relevant to the new conditions and to conform to the realities of the 1990s and the aspirations of the African population.

3. To create a better atmosphere and understanding, academics and researchers need to be treated with normal respect and dignity which most of them deserve. More importantly they need to be remunerated adequately and in equivalent terms in relation to their colleagues in other countries.

4. Academic freedom must be completely safeguarded. Academics who make critique of society or of some government policy should not be viewed by the governments with suspicion or branded as "traitors". Similarly the autonomy of universities and other institutions of research must be publically acknowledged and guaranteed

5. Academics, on their part, must acknowledge and practise their responsibility to the government and society at

large. They must further acknowledge that what has gone wrong with some government policies, in the post-independence era, is not the sole responsibility of the ruling factions of the elite. Academics will then be prepared to take up their responsibility and contribute to the process of nation-building. However, they could only do that if they felt that their work, when it is constructive, was appreciated.

6. Long-term perspective studies, on various policy issues, must be introduced and promoted by both universities and governments. Such studies could provide part of the lacking conducive atmosphere and create the most needed arena that would consolidate dialogue and cooperative relationship between academics and decision makers.

7. Regional organizations namely the ECA, OAU, ADB, should shed bureaucratic encapsulation and start mobilizing Africa's brain power - the academics and researchers who are presently outside their boundaries, by strong links and consultation with them and their respective research institutions. Such cooperation, if sustained, would allow the regional institutions to play a more prominent intellectual role as well as permitting local researchers to effectively contribute to policy formulation at the regional level.

8. Closer interaction is again desired between regional institutions and the regional and sub-regional research NGOs (e.g. CODESRIA and OSSREA). The mobilization of the wider research community, through such interaction, would generate a strong African intellectual force to challenge the hegemonic status established by the IMF/WB and the donor community, which together have for long dominated the sphere of policy making in Africa and importing their model of development

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between policy makers and university-based research institutions has evolved through various phases, corresponding to the last three decades of the post-independence era. During the 1960s, university researchers and intellectuals played, and succumbed to, the role defined for them by the governments. By the end of the 1970s, however, the established consensus over this "division of labour" had disintegrated. The relationships between decision makers and academics degenerated and became one characterised with suspicion and antagonism. By the 1980s, the input of local research was no longer seen relevant or necessary by the governments. During this decade, research institutions completely stagnated and expatriates experts predominated by defining both the agenda of research and the formulation of its results into policy packages. The new circumstances, witnessed by the continent in the early 1990s, propagated a climate of rising hopes for an imminent improvement in the socio-economic situation and the unfolding of a democratic system of governance. It is within these new realities that appropriate avenues of cooperation and dialogue are to be sought by both decision makers and academics. Both should make a new start with hopes of establishing a new consensus within the framework of the optimism of the 1990s.



## FOOTNOTES

1. See, for example, Cernea, M., (ed), **Putting People First: Sociological Variables in Rural Development**, Oxford University Press, 1985.
2. Janidu, L., **The Social Sciences and Development in Africa: Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Zimbabwe**, SAREC Report, 1985.
3. This concern can be indicated by a workshop which was jointly organized, as early as 1976 in Khartoum, by IDSRC, UNU, OECD and CODESRIA, and deliberated on the issues pertaining to policy and research.
4. Bujra, A., "Anthropology and the African Crises: Challenging the Dilemma", paper presented to a workshop organized by CODESRIA on, **Anthropology in Africa: Past, Present and Emerging visions**, 11-13, Nov., Dakar.
5. Umbadda, S., "Africa's Institutes of Higher Learning at Crossroads: With Special reference to Admission to the University of Khartoum", paper prepared for Vice-Chancellors of African Universities Conference on: "The Tasks Facing Institutes of Higher Learning in the Light of Challenges Posed by Africa's Socio-economic crisis", 18-22, Feb., 1985, Swaziland.
6. ECA: **African Alternative to Structural Adjustment Programmes (AA\_SAPs)**, E/ECA/CM.15/6/REV.2, April, 1989.
7. WB: **Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth**, 1989, p. 54.