The Roles of Think Tanks Institution in Public Policy Development in Nigeria

By

Olowu Olagunju Folorunso, PhD
Department of political science & International Relations
University of Abuja
Olagunju.olowu@uniabuja.edu.ng

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Chukwudi Oracle Nwala, PhD
Department of political science & International Relations
University of Abuja

Abstract

This study examined the critical roles of think tanks, particularly the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), in Nigeria's policy development processes. Employing a mixed-research strategy with an exploratory research design, the study integrated primary and secondary data sources to achieve comprehensive insights. Data were collected through structured questionnaires distributed to 390 stratified respondents, including National Assembly members and NIPSS alumni across various Ministries Departments and Agencies (MDAs). Secondary data sources included policy papers, academic journals, and official reports. Descriptive statistics and thematic content analysis were utilized to analyse the quantitative and qualitative data, respectively. The findings revealed a limited understanding of think tanks among policymakers, which hampers their integration into policy development. Despite this, think tanks are acknowledged for their broad contributions, particularly in economic development, national security and governance reforms. Challenges such as inadequate funding, limited visibility and restricted access to decision-makers were identified as barriers to maximizing their impact. Recommendations include increasing awareness of think tanks' roles, fostering stronger collaboration with government institutions and establishing sustainable funding mechanisms. These measures are essential to enhance the influence of think tanks, ensuring their insights translate into evidence-based policies that address Nigeria's developmental challenges effectively.

Keywords: Think Tanks, Institution, Public Policy, Development, Nigeria

Introduction

The need for national growth stimulates governments across the globe to develop policies which serves as footprint for the actualisation of their political agendas. This is crucial for a country's functioning and progress as it involves the creation, evaluation and implementation of guidelines to address societal issues. In doing this, governments establish institutions for the conduct of research with a view to understudy successful policy development and implementation (Abelson, 2002). These institutions which are categorically referred to as think tanks, often comprised of experts in various fields, including economics, political science, sociology and other relevant disciplines (Missiroli and Ioannides, 2012). They are typically independent organisations that offer unbiased and objective analysis of policy issues and challenges. Their research is often evidence-based, relying on empirical data and rigorous methodologies, which makes them contribute to more informed and effective policy decisions of governments (Boateng, 2018).

The role of think tanks in policy development is crucial for shaping the direction and effectiveness of government initiatives (James, 1993). For instance, think tanks in the United States of America (USA) play a significant role in shaping public policy through research, analysis and the generation of ideas (Mahmood and Qadar, 2019). The United States has 2,203 think tanks, a more than two-fold increase since 1980. These institutions generate new ideas for policy development, assess existing policies, draw attention to neglected problems, convene experts for discussion and engage with the government. They also engage in advocacy and public education in their support for inclusive policy development efforts (Del Rosso, 2021).

Think tanks are important in policy formulation and development in Nigeria, as they do in many other countries.

To enhance the development of policies in Nigeria, the various government have endeavoured several think tanks that carry out research for strategic process purposes. Among these are the Nigerian Economic Summit Group (NESG), Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), National Institute for

Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Centre for Development and Democracy (CDD) and The Initiative for Public Policy Analysis and Management [IPPAM] (*The Vanguard, 2021*). Altogether, NIPSS is the highest think tank in the country and with the exclusive privilege of presenting its research findings directly to the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and thus, plays significant roles in shaping government decisions and informing policy and strategy development.

Since the advent of Nigeria's current democratic era in 1999, the Federal Government of Nigeria has enacted numerous national policies across various economic sectors (Ughulu and Nwokike, 2020). The incorporation of largely think tanks such as the NIPSS, Kuru in research and advice has significantly shaped these policy developments, while ensuring the success of some of their objectives, although others have still fallen short of their intended outcomes. This collaboration between policymakers and expert researchers has been crucial in driving informed decision-making, fostering innovation and addressing complex economic challenges. Notwithstanding some setbacks, the influence of NIPSS has undoubtedly contributed to the progress and refinement of Nigeria's policy landscape.

The crucial role of think tanks in bridging research and policy formulation is well-recognized across countries. However, NIPSS and similar institutions in Nigeria face significant challenges in demonstrating their effectiveness and influence in the policymaking process. Despite NIPSS's active engagement in public policy discussions, its direct impact on policy decisions at both federal and state levels remains insufficient. A key issue is the difficulty in attributing government policies to the Institute's research, even when these findings are adopted at the federal level. This disconnect is exacerbated by the fact that NIPSS's contributions, when utilized, are rarely credited to the Institute, which undermines its visibility and perceived value.

Furthermore, the timing of policy decisions by government officials often suggests that larger political forces may be steering the agenda, overshadowing the potential influence of the think tank's contributions. This situation highlights the ongoing struggle of NIPSS to have its research outcomes appropriately recognized

and integrated into the policymaking process. As a result, the Institute's ability to bridge the gap between research and policy effectively is compromised, pointing to the need for better mechanisms to ensure that research findings are not only utilized but also attributed correctly. Given the foregoing, this study was motivated by the inadequacies of NIPSS engagement in policy development in Nigeria. Consequently, examining the role of the institute to policy development in the country becomes imperative.

Literature Review

Various authors have made contributions to the discuss of think tanks and policy development in Nigeria. For instance, Stone (2013:64) avers that think tanks engage in research, analysis and communication for policy development within local communities, national governments and international institutions in both public and private domains. He stated that despite the divergence in legal constitution, the roles and functions of think tanks put them at the intersection of academia, public policy and politics, where they aim to make connections between policy analysis and policy making. However, considerable diversity exists among think tanks in terms of size, ideology, resources and the quality or quantum of analytic output produced. According to Stone and Ladi (2017), think tanks work by applying knowledge to policy problems. This is complemented by strategies to develop advisory ties to government or the public as brokers of policy analysis. Accordingly, think tank policy analysis is not simply an intellectual exercise that is manifested through expert commentary or policy documents. Instead, policy analysis is also action oriented and reliant on policy entrepreneurship and institution building.

Similarly, Nkrumah (2022) states that think tanks that often serve the State directly or are State-based think tanks have directed their resources to three activities. These are knowledge creation, policy advice and monitoring of government programmes. Nkrumah's perspective underscores the contributions of think tanks closely associated with the State. These entities not only contribute to knowledge creation but also act as key players in shaping policies and monitoring their implementation. This tripartite focus on knowledge creation, policy advice and programme monitoring reflect the dynamic and integral role that State-based think tanks play in supporting effective governance through policy examination

and analysis. Bhatnagar (2021) contends that think tanks are avenues for the discussion of new policy ideas as well as used for the consolidation of existing understandings of global and/or national political issues. As intellectual actors, think tanks interact with policy frameworks at different levels, either at the framing stage or at the stage of consensus building towards particular policies. Bhatnagar posited further that academic elites at think tanks allow for the introduction of think tank ideas into the policy frames as well as the creation of public opinion towards foreign policy decisions. Think tank deliberations involve an interaction with policymakers, academic experts, business and social actors, as well as the media to disseminate ideas. Institutionally, think tanks in a wide variety of political contexts play a critical role in the making of foreign policy and bring closer attention to processes of state-society interactions in different political environments.

McGann et al. (2014) identified that think tanks may have access to policymakers, for instance, but lack credibility because of an apparent ideological bias on the part of the institution. In such instances, policymakers may doubt the relevance or sincerity of the policy advice or simply ignore it in their policy development process. Thus, think tanks need to establish and maintain credibility to have an impact on policy, as public perception of bias or lack of objectivity can undermine their influence and trustworthiness in policy development. Ordonez (2013) opines that most think tanks focused their attention on specific country's context. By doing so, overemphasis on the country may outshine the issues broader complexities. This however, does not mean that the researchers are less knowledgeable or that they have less experience in the issue, but that they emphasised the country over the issue.

McGann et al. (2017) posited that effective communication of complex research findings to policymakers and the general public is a constant challenge faced by think tanks in their policy making efforts. To them, misinterpretation or oversimplification of think tanks research findings hinder the adoption of evidence-based strategies in policy development. Furthermore, McGann et al. revealed that think tanks face challenges in gaining access to decision-makers, particularly if their recommendations go against prevailing political ideologies or interests. In any case, building relationships with policymakers is crucial for

effective impact in the process of policy development. Thus, the authors advice that think tank leaders could first build trust with policymakers and the public by ensuring a high level of integrity, credibility, transparency, independence and quality of their work. McGann et al. (2017) equally revealed that fluctuations in funding levels affect a think tank's ability to sustain its operations and maintain a consistent research agenda. This leads to short-term thinking and a focus on projects that are more likely to attract funding rather than focusing on policy issues of the country. According to McGann et al., competition between think tanks and governments officials in securing international financial resources, as well as the limited involvement of the private sector also contribute to dearth of finance for think tanks. Therefore, the authors suggested that think tanks should strengthen their strategic partnerships and seek long-term contracts in order to anticipate revenue streams for subsequent years. McGann et al. also recommended that, while staying true to their missions, think tanks need to strive for a better understanding of evolving philanthropy in their space and seek to define synergies and value propositions that attract private sector investments.

In a similar report, Alvarado (2021) identified that one of the challenges shared by think tanks in countries where the economic crisis has been most acute is the possibility of facing reductions in funding. Thus, many think tanks rely on external funding, which compromise their independence. Alvarado added that funding from specific interest groups or political entities influence the direction and focus of research, potentially leading to biased or skewed policy recommendations. Komilov (2023) asserts that the growing trend of think tanks engaging more actively with the public is a major prospect for them in contributing to policy development. According to him, social media platforms have enabled think tanks to reach a wider audience and meeting the increasing demand for expert opinions. This development aligns with the emergence of consulting companies conducting political and economic research. Thus, signifies a profitable opportunity for think tanks engagement in policy development. In addition, the opened and engaged approach of think tanks to both domestic and international affairs reflect their positive trajectory in policy development. Think tanks have the flexibility to explore unconventional approaches and challenge existing norms. This ability to think outside the box could lead to the development of novel and impactful policies. Komilov concluded that the vital role of think tanks in shaping effective

and informed policies, and their prospects in policy development remain promising due to their diverse contributions and adaptability to evolving political challenges.

The First Nations Public Service Secretariat [FNPSS] (2020) asserts that policy development usually involves the identification, research and analysis of a particular issue, and consultation with communities, community members and other stakeholders. The information gathered through these consultations is then synthesised to produce options and recommendations on a proposed way forward for Elected Leaders to decide upon in the form of a policy proposal. A policy proposal usually includes implementation strategies and communications plans. Leaders and administrative policy decision-makers then decide how to move forward, and the decision is linked to a first nation's priorities, strategic plans, budgets and agenda. FNPSS stated that once a decision to move ahead on a particular option is made, the implementation of the policy commences, and it is monitored and evaluated to ensure that arising issues are addressed. FNPSS thus, concluded that developing policy could fail during the implementation phase without due consultations to relevant stakeholders which think tanks belong to.

Hardee et al. (2012) posits that it is important to ensure that stakeholder communication and coordination occurs on a continuous basis in the development of policy, not just during a one-time event such as a national conference. The Agency added that in most countries, especially developing nations, both public and private sector stakeholders need to be involved. Other stakeholders in policy development are politicians; government officials, and staff from the relevant ministries and departments (including finance); local government representatives; and representatives of international organisations, civil society groups and private medical organisations; and advocacy groups and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). A major challenge identified by Hardee et al. in policy development is the assurance that women, vulnerable groups and others impacted by the policy are at the table and meaningfully involved throughout the process.
From the foregoing, it is evident that there is a gap in scholarly work examining the role of NIPSS as a think tank in Nigeria's policy development. While existing literature often acknowledges its contributions especially as a strategic institution, few studies critically analyze the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of NIPSS's

outputs in addressing Nigeria's governance and developmental challenges. This research aims to fill this gap by assessing the role of NIPSS in policy development in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Institutional Theory developed by Meyer John and Rowan Brain in 1977 and modified by DiMaggio and Powell in 1983. Institutional theory examines the role of institutions in shaping behaviour, organisations and society. These institutions have formal or informal rules, norms and practices that guide and constrain behaviour. The theory explores how these institutions influence individuals and organisational actions, and how they contribute to the stability and persistence of social structures (Aksom and Tymchenko, 2000). Three key concepts; isomorphism, legitimacy and institutional entrepreneurship are associated with institutional theory.

Isomorphism is the process through which organisations become similar or homogenous in response to institutional pressures. This occurs through coercive pressures (external demands), mimetic pressures (imitating successful models), or normative pressures (adoption of professional standards) (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). The perception of legitimacy is that, an organisation's actions and structures are appropriate, proper and conform to societal expectations (Pollock and Rindova, 2003). This is crucial for an organisation's survival and success. Institutional entrepreneurs play a role in challenging existing norms and shaping new institutional arrangements (Greenwood et al., 2011). The activities of individuals or organisations, according to institutional entrepreneurs, could intentionally and purposefully seek to create, disrupt or change institutions.

Critics such as Peters (2000), argued that institutional theory tends to overemphasise the forces of isomorphism, portraying organisations as passive entities that merely conform to external pressures. This oversimplification neglects the agency of individuals and organisations in actively shaping their environments. According to Jean-Claude (2011), institutional theory often downplays the role of power dynamics in shaping institutions. He argued that the theory does not adequately address how powerful actors influence and

manipulate institutional arrangements to serve their interests, potentially perpetuating inequalities.

Despite criticism, applying institutional theory in the study offers a valuable framework for examining the role of think tanks in policy development, specifically within the context of NIPSS. Institutional theory highlights how organizational behaviour and actions are often influenced by external social pressures, norms and expectations, rather than merely by internal goals or efficiency. By applying this theory to NIPSS, it is possible to analyse how institutional forces have shaped the Institute's role and effectiveness in Nigeria's policy-making arena. This approach underscores that NIPSS, as a state-sponsored think tank, is likely subject to significant pressures to align its activities with the government's policy objectives, while also striving to meet international standards and norms. Thus, using institutional theory enables a nuanced analysis of how external pressures might influence NIPSS's policy directions, priorities and strategies.

Institutional theory further justifies examining the isomorphic pressures faced by NIPSS, pressures to model its processes and behaviours after successful global policy research organizations. This includes mimetic forces, where NIPSS may adopt practices from esteemed policy institutions to build legitimacy; normative pressures, which compel NIPSS to meet professional standards and expectations in policy research; and regulative pressures from governmental oversight, shaping its activities in alignment with state norms. Through this theoretical lens, one can better assess how NIPSS navigates these institutional dynamics to establish itself as a legitimate actor in Nigeria's policy landscape. Such an approach allows for a comprehensive evaluation of NIPSS's effectiveness in policy development, focusing on how it balances alignment with government norms while contributing to policy evolution and innovation in Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a mix-research-strategy. The rationale for this is that it helps the researcher to gain a more complete picture of the phenomenon under investigation than a standalone quantitative or qualitative study as it integrates the benefits of

both methods through triangulation. Also, the study used Exploratory Research Design. This design allows the identification or assessment of in-depth causes and effects of whatever phenomenon is being investigated.

Sources of Data

The main two techniques used in sourcing data are: primary and secondary sources. The primary source include survey, in which opened and closed-ended questionnaire was used. The instrument consisted of dichotomous, multiple choice and rating questions in which primary quantitative data was sourced. The secondary sources were library and internet search. Based on this, the study made references to relevant policy papers, books, peer-reviewed journals, official government documents and reports.

Study Population and Size

The study population consists of key stakeholders, including members of the National Assembly and NIPSS alumni spread across various Ministries, Departments, and Agencies (MDAs). The inclusion of members of the National Assembly is crucial because these individuals are directly involved in the legislative process and making decisions that shape the policy landscape of Nigeria. Similarly, NIPSS alumni, who hold strategic positions within MDAs, represent an important group for the study. As former participants in the policy development and strategic studies programmes at NIPSS, they have first-hand experience with the institute's training and can provide informed perspectives on how the think tank's activities translate into practical policy implementation within government institutions.

In determining the study sample size, the total population of the selected strata was obtained. Based on the total population of the MDAs, a sample size of 390 was obtained after using the Taro Yamane Sample Size Formula with an approximate total population of approximately 15,000 at 5 per cent marginal error and 95 per cent confidence interval. This means, 390 questionnaires were distributed and administered to the stratified selected respondents across the MDAs with the view of sourcing quantitative data.

Taro Yamane Sample Size Calculation

$$n = \frac{N}{1+(N)\,e^2}$$

Where: n= Study Sample size (?)
N= Approximate population of National Assembly and NIPSS Alumni = 15,000
e= error level= 0.05

$$\text{Thus, } n = \frac{15{,}000}{1+(15{,}000)\,(0.05)^2} = \frac{15{,}000}{1+(15{,}000)\,(0.0025)}$$

$$\frac{15{,}000}{38.5} = 389.6 \quad n = \textbf{390 Respondents}$$

Sampling Technique: The study respondents were selected by stratified sampling technique across strata that form the study population. The advantage of using a stratified sampling technique to select study respondents is that it ensures a more representative and accurate reflection of the population's diversity. The study conducted a standardisation test to enhance the validity and reliability of the study instruments. To archive this, copies of the two instruments (Questionnaire and Interview Guide) were given to some senior lecturers at University of Abuja, to critique the instruments. Their criticisms and observations were consequently used in drafting the final copies of the instrument before the commencement of the fieldwork.

Method of Data Analysis: The quantitative data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics and presented in tables and charts. The qualitative data were transcribed, sorted, categorised and subjected to thematic content analysis in line with the research questions.

Discussion of Findings

A total of 390 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the selected respondents. Out of this number, 382 which represents 97.9% were retrieved, while only 8 copies which represent 2.1% were not retrieved. The reason for this

response rate was because the questionnaires were administered using online Google survey, thus, easily accessible to respondents.

Figure 1 reveals that many Nigeria's policymakers and government officials have a limited understanding of think tanks, with 55.9% of the respondents indicating they do not understand them very well. Only 3.3% of the respondents claimed they understand them very well, 8.6% indicated they understand it well, while 25.8% specified they somewhat understand it. This highlights a significant gap in awareness of the value of think tanks among the country's decision-makers, which could hinder effective policy collaboration and utilization of research-based insights.

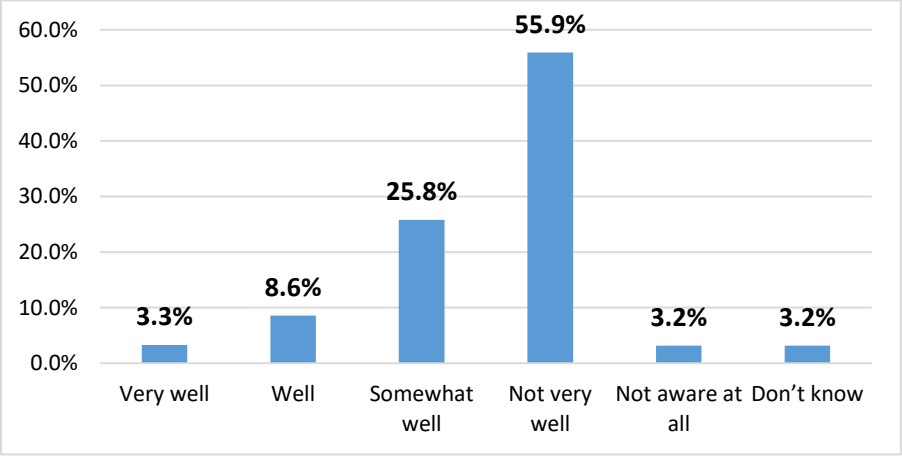


Figure 1: Nigeria policymakers and government officials understanding of think tanks operating in the country and their value to policy development

The data presented in Figure 2 shows that a strong majority of respondents representing 62.0% believe that think tanks in Nigeria play multiple roles in shaping and influencing policy decisions. Thus, suggesting that they recognize the comprehensive contributions of these institutions in the development of developmental policies in the country. Additionally, individual roles like providing expert analysis (4.6%) and conducting independent evaluations (8.8%) are frequently acknowledged, indicating a perception that think tanks are most valuable when fulfilling a broad range of functions rather than specializing in specific areas.

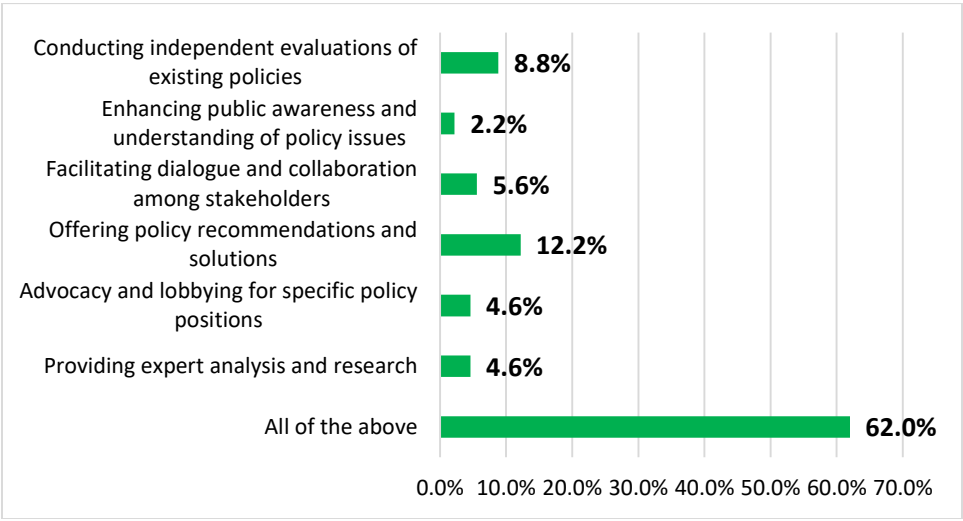


Figure 2: Specific roles think tanks play in shaping and influencing policy decisions in Nigeria

Figure 3 indicates half of the respondents, 50.2%, believe that think tanks contribute across multiple policy areas in Nigeria, emphasizing their broad impact on policy development. Economic development (18.6%) and national security (15.6%) are seen as the top individual areas of contribution, while social welfare and gender parity, as well as environmental sustainability are perceived to receive significantly less attention.

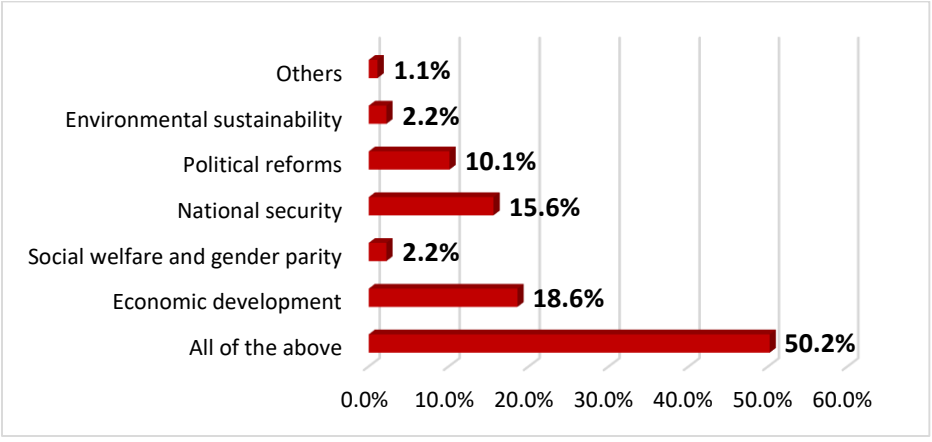


Figure 3: Policy areas think tanks have contributed the most to policy development in Nigeria

The data in Figure 4 shows that 39.8% of respondents rate the contribution of think tanks to policy development in Nigeria as medium, while 25.8% consider it high, suggesting a moderate to significant influence. However, a notable cumulative 23.6% of respondents view this contribution as low or very low, indicating room for improvement in the effectiveness and visibility of think tanks in shaping policies. Deductively, think tanks have contributed significantly to policy development in Nigeria.

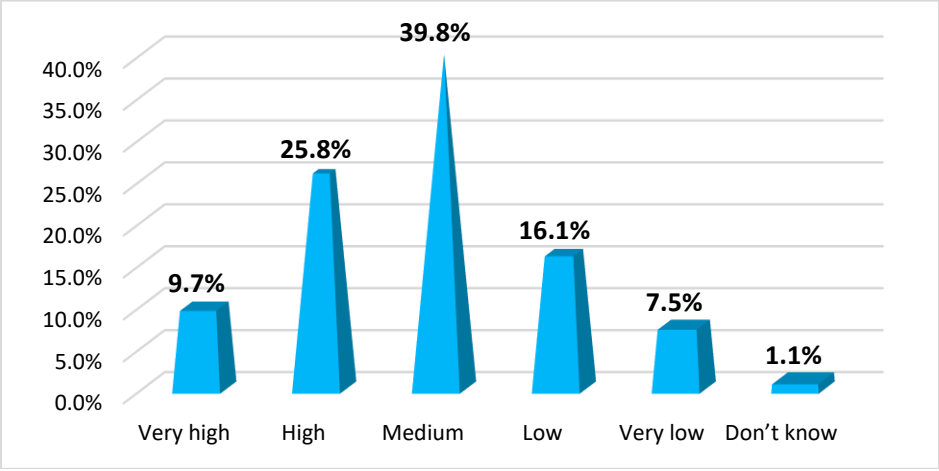


Figure 4: Contribution of think tanks to policy development in Nigeria

The limited understanding of NIPSS by Nigerian policymakers and government officials revealed in this study highlights a significant challenge to the effective integration of research-driven expertise into policy development. This gap suggests that think tanks are underutilized, not appreciated or misunderstood, which may result in missed opportunities to enhance the quality of policies through evidence-based analysis. Without proper engagement and collaboration with think tanks, the government risks relying on less informed or outdated approaches, potentially hindering effective governance and policy outcomes. It is therefore, submitted that enhancing awareness and understanding of the role of think tanks among Nigerian policymakers is essential for maximizing their potential contributions to national policy development.

Despite the limited understanding, think tanks in Nigeria play multiple critical roles in the policy development process. They not only provide expert analysis and data-driven insights but also conduct independent evaluations of existing policies, ensuring that decisions are grounded in evidence. Through enhancing public awareness and understanding of policy issues, think tanks in Nigeria will foster a more informed citizenry and encourage public engagement in policymaking. This role will position think tanks as vital actors in shaping and influencing policy decisions, particularly in a country where informed policy discourse can significantly impact governance and development.

Think tanks in Nigeria contribute across a wide range of policy areas, including economic development, national security, political reforms, social welfare and gender parity, as well as environmental sustainability. These contributions demonstrate the breadth of expertise that think tanks bring to the table. In economic development, for instance, think tanks provide critical insights into fiscal policies and economic reforms, while in national security, they offer research on strategies to combat insurgency and insecurity. Their work in political reforms, social welfare and gender parity has the potential to support more inclusive and equitable governance, while contributions to environmental sustainability are increasingly important in the context of global climate change.

However, the research finding that the contribution of think tanks to policy development in Nigeria is considered average indicates that there is still room for improvement. Factors such as limited funding, lack of access to decision-makers, or underappreciation of their expertise could be hindering think tanks from reaching their full potential. Tackling these challenges would not only enhance the quality of policies but also lead to more informed, effective governance in Nigeria. Strengthening the relationship between think tanks and policymakers in Nigeria will make the country leverage the full range of expertise available to tackle its complex developmental challenges.

Highlight of Key Findings

i. Policymakers and government officials in Nigeria have limited understanding of think tanks.

ii. Think tanks in Nigeria play multiple roles, including providing expert analysis, conducting independent evaluations of existing policies, enhancing public awareness and understanding of policies issues, in shaping and influencing policy decisions.
iii. Think tanks contributions to policy areas in Nigeria encompasses economic development, national security, political reforms, social welfare and gender parity, as well as environmental sustainability.
iv. The contribution of think tanks to policy development in Nigeria is on the average.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Think tanks, particularly NIPSS, have made substantial contributions to policy development in Nigeria. Serving as a centre for intellectual exploration and strategic innovation, NIPSS has consistently offered solutions to the nation's pressing challenges. Its capacity to engage experts across diverse fields, produce actionable recommendations, and cultivate leadership within the policymaking space underscores its vital role in the country's governance landscape. However, ensuring these contributions translate into measurable developmental outcomes remains an ongoing challenge for Nigeria as a country. The influence of NIPSS is evident in its promotion of evidence-driven policymaking. Through research, strategic studies and leadership training, the institute empowers decision-makers with tools essential for addressing critical national issues. The Senior Executive Course (SEC) has been instrumental in generating high-quality recommendations aimed at improving governance, security and socio-economic conditions.

Despite their role, the limited understanding of think tanks among policymakers in Nigeria underscores a critical barrier to the effective integration of research-driven insights into governance. This gap diminishes the potential for collaboration and the utilization of evidence-based approaches in addressing complex national challenges. Without a deeper appreciation for the role of NIPSS, decision-makers will continue to rely on outdated or insufficiently informed methods, which could undermine the quality and impact of public policies. Closing this awareness gap through advocacy, capacity-building and stronger engagement with think tanks is essential for harnessing their expertise and fostering more effective governance. Think tanks in Nigeria continue to play a

pivotal role in policy development across various sectors, offering comprehensive insights and fostering informed discourse. Their contributions to economic development, national security, and governance reforms highlight their capacity to address critical national priorities. Strengthening collaborations between think tanks and policymakers, along with investments in their capacity, would enhance their effectiveness and ensure their insights translate into meaningful policy outcomes for sustainable national progress.

To enhance the role of think tanks in Nigeria's policy development, several measures should be prioritized. First, increased awareness campaigns and capacity-building programmes for policymakers are necessary to bridge the understanding gap regarding the value of think tanks. Second, stronger collaborations between think tanks, government institutions and the private sector should be established to ensure research findings inform decision-making processes. Third, sustainable funding mechanisms must be implemented to enhance the operational capacity and independence of these institutions. Finally, think tanks, particularly NIPSS, should leverage technology and global best practices to improve the quality and relevance of their research, addressing emerging challenges such as climate change, digital transformation and economic diversification.

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