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Routledge
2022

Laakso , L 2022 , The Social Science Foundations of Public Policy in Africa . in G Onyango (ed.) , Routledge Handbook of Public Policy and Administration in Africa . Routledge handbooks , Routledge , Abingdon, Oxon , pp. 23-33 . <
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003143840-3/social-science-foundations-public-policy-a>
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<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/355446>

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THE SOCIAL SCIENCE FOUNDATIONS OF PUBLIC POLICY IN AFRICA

Liisa Laakso

Introduction

The multiple and sometimes contradictory expectations of African governments, the public and the international community on the role of higher education in development have affected the content and conditions of social sciences in particular. However, the existing research on university education in Africa has focused chiefly on the institutions, i.e., establishing universities, their resources, autonomy and performance (Nwauwa 1993; Kallaway 2020). It has revealed changing motivations in the key actors' decisions to invest in higher education: those of the colonial authorities, the governments of the newly independent states, Cold War superpower blocks and commercial enterprises (Mamdani 2007). Independence, to begin with, was followed by a heated debate of the autonomy vs relevance of universities for the developmental state (Assié-Lumumba 2006). In the 1980s and 1990s, the economic crisis hampered the financing of public universities (Chachage 2006, pp. 49–50). At the beginning of the new Millennium, the universities' different rankings and their reputation and critics of these rankings became almost standard ingredients of all debates of the university sector's performance globally, Africa included (Mohammedbhai 2012).

Less attention has been paid to the continuities and resilience of scholarly work on development challenges in these changing conditions. Public policy combining wide areas of social science knowledge and expertise of other fields is critical in this regard. It is directly linked to governability and expertise necessary for the state authorities' competence and legitimacy domestically and internationally. In that sense, public policy in university education and research provides a unique window to explore the form and content of the interaction between academia and state and trust between them. This chapter examines the creation of specialised social science research institutes of public policy and debates of the relevance and freedom of research in the field from this particular angle. I will first review the literature on the evolution of the social sciences in Africa, paying attention to the inherited traditions guiding their institutionalisation within university faculties and departments.

Social science traditions in Africa

Modern university education was part of the colonial project, however not in any coherent or uniform pattern. The driving forces were the “civilising mission” of colonial authorities and missionaries under their auspices, strengthening the links between metropolises and colonies but also the “native demand of education” in response to the international organisation of the Global South by the League of Nations among others (Matasci, Jerónimo, and Dorez 2020, p. 8). Colonial authorities laid grounds for higher education in Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco, Nigeria, Rhodesia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tunisia and Uganda with branches of metropolitan universities, colleges providing bachelor’s degrees and even a few full standing universities (Ajayi, Goma, and Johnson 1996) representing the then most up-to-date scientific knowledge. According to Héléne Charton, Britain implemented university reforms in the 1940s in East Africa with an explicit focus on social policy and modernisation. The reforms comprised new universities in the region and offered African’s scholarships to study in Britain to build up local elites with strong links to the metropole (Charton 2020). After independence, Britain also introduced specific “study and serve” programs for young British scholars combining fieldwork with short-term teaching duties at African universities. However, although African universities needed teachers, solving the problem by visiting fellows created another problem. Local scholars’ aspirations to develop their academic careers were also seriously frustrated by Foreign “inundation” (McKay 1968, p. 1; Laakso 2020, p. 444).

In the former French colonies, organisations promoting French language and cultural relations included L’Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), founded in 1970. The cooperation agreements in higher education comprised exchange programs, financial help to new universities and French teachers’ deployment. According to Samy Mesli, the latter effectively renewed and cemented the French view of Africa’s development in the curricula across disciplines (Mesli 2013).

Colonial powers also brought different academic traditions to Africa, most notably the French or continental tradition and the Anglophone one (Aina 1997). In the first case, social sciences build on the “old” disciplines of philosophy, history and law. This also explains the conceptual and moral profile of Francophone social science research. The focus, however, has been on education and professional training. Francophone Africa’s research intensity and output in social sciences have been lower than that of Anglophone Africa (on the evidence of international scientific indexing, ISI, see Mouton 2010, p. 64). The connection of social sciences to law and jurist education explains the professional focus.

However, significant is also how different branches of higher education are valued in the French tradition. The so-called *grandes écoles* are at the top of the hierarchy. Several of them were established in Africa just before or after independence. In Cameroon, for instance, the *École Nationale d’Administration et de Magistrature* (ENAM), training school for civil servants, emulating the French *École Nationale d’Administration* (ENA), was the first institution of higher education. It was established two years before independence in 1959 and continues to be the most prestigious and secure way to a government job. The ENAM entrance is much more selective than universities, and university studies are often regarded only as preparatory to ENAM. Thus, university students might select disciplines like law, political science or administration in the hope of being able to get into ENAM instead of having an interest in social science research skills.

The Anglophone tradition of social sciences has built on the independent scientific basis of these disciplines and instigated faculties comprised of “original” social science disciplines:

political science, economics and sociology. This tradition was strongly influenced by social-political and epistemological developments in the US in the early 20th century, particularly the Chicago school that emphasised objective, although diverse, social science research methods and a mission to strengthen and improve democratic rule (Platt 1996). Ebrima Sall, in his comprehensive review of the state of social sciences in Africa for the US-based Social Science Research Council in 2003, noted the pre-eminence of the Anglophone tradition in Africa. The disciplines of political science, economics and sociology were the most institutionalised in Africa (Sall 2003, pp. 40–1).

Like elsewhere, the African university disciplines have fragmented into specialised sub-disciplines and integrated into thematic, multidisciplinary fields of social research. This has taken place partly to respond to the demands of labour markets and attract the best students, partly to respond to the emerging and global challenges of sustainable development. Furthermore, continental networks like Afrobarometer, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Association of African Universities (AAU) have successfully worked across regional boundaries to enhance the quality of social science research and education. Important initiatives include harmonising university degrees (Kigotho 2015) and an intra-African mobility scheme (Woldegiorgis and Doevenspeck 2015). Despite these developments, the inherited traditions matter and contribute differently to African social scientists' capacities to support and assess government policies in employment, education, health and the environment. Traditions influence research intensity, topics and methodologies used, and the difficult balancing between practical and theoretical research (Chachage 2001).

Public policy research institutes

Along with the growing needs for evidence-based knowledge for policy formulation and implementation, the scope of social science research widened from the predominantly colonial concentration in anthropology or ethnology to development and social policy. Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER) and Makerere Institute of Social Research (MISR) are examples of research institutes that included such new fields in their areas of expertise (Mbalibulha 2013, p. 127). Universities also initiated new institutes like the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in 1965; the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER) at the University of Ghana in 1969; Centre Ivoirien de Recherches Economiques et Sociales (CIRES) at the University of Abidjan in 1971; the Institute of Development Research (IDR) at the Addis Ababa University in 1972; and the Development Studies and Research Centre (DSRC) at the University of Khartoum in 1976 (Rasheed 1994). Moreover, the governments upgraded colonial institutes, in Zambia the Staff Training Colleges to National Institutes of Public Administration (NIPA) in 1966, or established new institutes, like the Namibia Institute of Public Administration and Management (NIPAM) in 2010. These often operated outside the ministry's hierarchies but with precise tasks of providing training to civil servants and evaluation and strategic studies for management and administrative reforms.

While much of the policy-oriented research has been applied social research, African researchers also produced groundbreaking theoretical work. However, the latter has often been overlooked not least by Africans themselves negatively impacting efforts to ensure adequate and context informed academic training, teaching and academic research of African public policy in universities. There have also been only limited efforts to develop adequate approaches for Comparative Public Policy and development that may enhance effective

theorisation (Hyden 2019). The research impact, however, was enhanced by researchers' active role in the discussions and even actual writing of National Development Plans (Rashed 1994). An interesting example in that regard is the Zimbabwe Institute of Development Studies (ZIDS) whose evolving status vis-à-vis the government reveals many challenges in producing independent policy-relevant knowledge for governments.

The government established the institute in 1982, soon after the transition from minority-ruled Southern Rhodesia to majority-ruled Zimbabwe, with close supervision of CODESRIA and international donors' support. Brian Raftopoulos argues that an essential context for this decision was the desire to balance the domination of the white minority at the then sole university in the country (Raftopoulos 2016). The aim was to create a socialist society in Zimbabwe in line with the political program of the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). ZIDS started as a parastatal under the Ministry of Manpower Planning and Development and, as the whole public service, attracted liberation movement scholars from exile. Several ZIDS researchers made a career in the civil service, too. Furthermore, ZIDS became an important hub for critical intellectuals from other African countries, not least due to Zimbabwe's high expectations to become a model for South Africa, where the struggle against apartheid continued.

ZIDS's researchers shared a neo-Marxist political economy theoretical approach to development, while their empirical work's policy scope was very broad. In 1987, the institute included six departments: Agriculture and Rural Development; Education and Social Development; Labour Studies; History and Politics; Industry, Science and Technology; and Southern African and International Relations. Towards the end of its first decade, the role of consultancy and studies commissioned by government ministries and donor agencies grew. The economic and political context also changed with the structural adjustment program's (SAP) austerity measures, popular protests by civil society groups including students and the labour union, emergence of new political opposition and increasingly vocal academia.

This background informed the move of ZIDS to the University of Zimbabwe, detaching it physically away from the government premises in Harare city centre. This action particularly added teaching to the institute's tasks. However, above all, it opened new space for independent knowledge production and debates, the significance of which grew amid the economic and political crisis in the country (Raftopoulos 2016). However, eventually, the crisis hampered the universities' economies, resulting in a continuous need to cut the costs by reorganising teaching and research. Simultaneously, the government's strategy to create economic growth by innovation and industrialisation in higher education (Tirivangana 2019) made the political economy approach to development more or less redundant. As a result, there was no more a need for a specialised institute for development. Researchers were integrated into different faculties, and the house of ZIDS in the centre of the university campus was allocated for other purposes. These moves effectively abolished the multidisciplinary critical research community that ZIDS once had been.

The question of relevance

Questions about the relevance of social science research in Africa have centred on state-building, i.e. modernisation, development and self-reliance (Ake 1982). This has had both ideological and practical dimensions. Ideological projects were fuelled by the Cold War rivalry and the superpowers' strategic interests, instrumentalising nationalist and pan-African movements' political aspirations. Practical concerns, in turn, stemmed from the departure of colonial administration and staff, resulting in immediate demand for qualified indigenous

staff in civil service and the private sector. Accordingly, education became one of the priorities for all African governments, and degree programs involving administration and policy studies became more popular than ever before.

These two dimensions – state-building, ideological Cold War rivalry and the practical need to build up a national elite – enhanced local research competence intertwined in the international education aid and scholarship programs. Both the US and the Soviet Union, with its allies, introduced significant scholarship programs for African students – in addition to those of the former colonial powers (Matasci et al. 2020, p. 18). The investments by the US, an emerging global hegemon, to education in Africa were most massive. They included the Fulbright exchange program and support provided by philanthropic foundations like Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie. The Soviet Union, in turn, established Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow in 1960 to educate students from the Global South in socialist solidarity, among other skills. Its faculties of History and Philology and Law and Economics were most important in this regard (see Katsakioris 2019). Several African presidents and ministers, in addition to university professors, were educated there.

The Cold War competition also motivated neutral countries to enhance their profile. Nordic countries, for instance, became prominent development partners for Southern African Frontline countries in their fight against apartheid rule in, South Africa, in a framework that was distinct of the superpower blocks or former colonies (Selbervik and Nygaard 2006). Scholarship programs extending to the training of the liberation movements SWAPO (South-West Africa People's Organisation) and ANC (African National Congress) officials in administrative skills were a significant part of this cooperation (Sellström 2002, pp. 715–22).

The withering away of the Cold War abolished the ideological role of the socialist block in education aid. However, the development aid regime's underlying importance for policy studies in Africa remained (see Delville 2017). International development organisations and donors have not only been important funders of policy research institutes and “customers” commissioning consultancy from them, but they have also played a key role in the direct formulation of the policies – either through supervision of the African governments based on their own international expertise or by conditioning their aid and loans with reforms epitomised in the SAPs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and 1990s. SAPs instigated lively and critical discussions among African scholars (Campbell 1989; Akindes 1999), contributing to the general African scholarship on democratisation at the end of the Cold War and during the transitions to multiparty electoral systems that followed (Mkandawire 1999).

According to Sadig Rasheed, for instance, the myriad challenges of human development, economic recovery and democratisation meant that Africa's social scientists could not “afford to stay aloof from the realm of policymaking and the possibility of employing the tools and analysis of their trade to offer pragmatic contributions on how to deal with societal problems and challenges” (Rasheed 1994, p. 92). This was also when the first generation of academics educated in Africa entered the field, strengthening indigenous think tanks and locally based social science expertise.

Freedom of public policy research

After independence, universities and higher education in Africa were “widely viewed as a route to national liberation” (Mama 2006, p. 5). Research on political participation, however, was soon regarded by African governments as “irrelevant” and “unfair” (Oyugi 1989). Claude Ake wrote in 1982 that the task of African scholars was to invent an appropriate model of

development for Africa. Nevertheless, since this, by definition, would challenge the existing order, it was also something the African governments were wary of (Ake 1982, p. 193). In 1990 a CODESRIA and Africa Watch conference in Kampala on the role of intellectuals in African politics resulted in the “Kampala Declaration on Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility.” It stipulates that “[t]he intellectual community has the responsibility to struggle for and participate in the struggle of the popular forces for their rights and emancipation.”

It is not a coincidence that this was presented at a time of intensifying popular protests demanding democratic opening all over Africa. Evidence also suggests that scholars’ ability to participate in political discussions has contributed to the consolidation of democracy in Africa (Kratou and Laakso 2021). According to the longitudinal worldwide academic freedom index of the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project that combines expert survey indications of its different dimensions, Africa’s level of academic freedom has continuously improved between 1989 and 2019 (Coppedge et al. 2020), although still below the world average. The improvement has not been uniform, however. A survey by Kwadwo Appiagyei-Atua, Klaus D. Beiter and Terence Karran of the legal protection of academic freedom in African universities confirms disparities between countries (Appiagyei-Atua, Beiter, and Karran 2016, pp. 19–20).

A litmus test of the trust between governments and researchers is the availability of public data and the regulation of research permits. Tanzania adopted in 2018 an amendment to the National Statistics Act regulating the use and collection of official public data, criminalising any publication of statistics without the approval of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) or questioning of official statistics of NBS. The stated aim was to ensure the reliability of statistical information. But in practice, this would have hampered the quality of research by making it impossible to verify research results based on NBS statistics by further research using other sources. Scholars both in Tanzania and abroad criticised the amendment violating the African Charter on Statistics. The most significant statement came from the World Bank, according to which “the amendments, if implemented, could have serious impacts on the generation and use of official and non-official statistics, which are a vital foundation for the country’s development” (World Bank 2018). Consequently, in 2019, the government had to reverse the amendment.

Yet in Tanzania, like in many other African countries, a researcher might face multiple constraints to conduct critical research that government authorities responsible for the policy sector in question have imposed. The necessity to obtain research permits is one of them. The process can easily take several months, which is enough to frustrate attempts to produce independent knowledge to the government and the public to benefit decision-making. It also leads to avoidance of politically sensitive research topics because to protect their own position, authorities are not likely to approve anything that even remotely can cause harm to their superiors.

However, already in 1999, Thandika Mkandawire noted that despite the “extremely repressive” conditions, social sciences in Africa “have remained critical and amazingly vibrant” (Mkandawire 1999, p. 24). One prominent example is public policy research, focusing on gender equality, education, health, land and the environment (see Darbon et al. 2019), which are not directly threatened by politically motivated censorship or self-censorship and thus open to original and ambitious theorising.

Impact

Assessing the impact of public policy research is challenging – both in the definition of the impact and its measurement. The impact can be observed in immediate policy objectives

and outcomes and in changing attitudes and practices. Researchers' ability to share new theoretical ideas and analytical concepts with decision-makers or advocacy groups can make them powerful drivers of policy transformations. However, in addition to a shared understanding of the problems the society faces, there needs to be a political motivation to solve them – either an electoral competition, international pressure or internal stability. All these highlight the importance of researchers' ability to build coalitions with the public authorities and beyond.

It is indisputable that impact is important for the quality of research. In their survey on the criteria for assessing research excellence in Africa, Robert Tijssen and Erika Kraemer-Mbula report that social development, awareness of societal issues and direct benefits to disadvantaged communities were among the outcomes researchers from different disciplines and across the continent regarded as the most important criteria. However, they are often overlooked in mainstream research evaluations. Researchers emphasised participatory and action-based approaches, pointing to the need to connect everyday African life and communities utilising the research results (Tijssen and Kraemer-Mbula 2018, pp. 397–8). Such notions are essential for research in the field of public policy.

The importance of the bottom-up approach and social networks involving civil society, family and local communities is echoed in the African Union's Social Policy Framework (African Union 2008). Furthermore, public policy evaluations have frequently identified local control as a critical factor for success (Juma and Clark 1995). Because the inherited colonial approach has equated authority to knowledge and separated policy guidelines from policy implementation, appropriate models for effective use of local talents and capacities have only slowly become part of Africa's mainstream policy planning (e.g., Allen and Perez-Trejo 1992). The dominance of the international donor community aggravates this situation. The donors are often responsible for the formulation of public policy. Yet, they have no competence to implement any policy without governments' approval and support (see Ouma and Adésinà 2019).

Empirical evidence of the outcomes of policy projects supports this view. Sam C. M. Ofori assessed local control in regional level projects to reduce poverty, disadvantage and deprivation in Ghana. He noted that a diversified resource base and "endogenised" development engagement offered the best potential to achieve such policy goals. However, according to him, the hallmark of endogeny was education within the planning and implementation of the projects. Generation of new knowledge, accumulation of human capital and technical skills training supported technology that proved realistic. This underlines the role of experiential learning and qualitative methodologies (Ofori 2020, p. 316). Similar observations are frequent in policy projects in public health. For instance, a study of health care fees in Burkina Faso concluded that policies assisting the poor to access health services should focus on the strengths of communities in education regarding medical issues that influence their well-being and risks of inappropriate diagnosis and treatment (Dong et al. 2004).

How then have the universities managed to epistemologically develop the discipline of public policy and, more importantly, influence governmental and non-governmental policymakers' behaviours? The experiences of post-1994 South Africa, where the government introduced new social policy based on equality, human rights and social justice, are particularly revealing. One example was the social science research programme on the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on society SAHA (the Social Aspects of HIV/AIDS and Health), including national survey studies, introduced in 2001. Its findings were disseminated in the broader region. Similar studies were implemented in other countries with the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC)'s support, while the researchers in South Africa

were still fighting against HIV denialism among the politicians. By intensive dialogue with the governments, provision of evidence, interventions and recommendations, the research program was able to have a positive impact and help responsible ministries to mitigate the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on vulnerable population groups, like orphans, for instance, in SADC and beyond in Africa (Simbayi 2019). In South Africa, the National Health Insurance Advisory Committee (NHIAC), established in 2009, has advised the government on legislation and HIV/AIDS policy implementation. Similar inclusion of humanities and social and behavioural science expertise has been called for in the government's strategies to combat COVID-19 (Amir Singh 2020).

It is undeniable that democratisation in many African countries has improved policy-makers and advisers' capacities to utilise social science research. This has contributed to improved service delivery, especially in health and education. However, the sustainability of public services additionally requires an environment of economic stability. In response to the increased government spending since the 1990s to the detriment of economic policy reforms, the focus of public policy has shifted from reforming government administrations to economic policies involving the private sector and other stakeholders' roles. For instance, health insurance can reduce affordability barriers for health care and result in greater resources flowing to private facilities, weakening the public sector, which in the long run affects equitable access to different levels of health care (Harris et al. 2011, pp. 119–20). That is why carefully tailored economic policies are pivotal for public policy development and the government's ability to implement policies.

Conclusions

University education and research on public policy and coalition-building between scholars, government, civil society and local communities are critical for social and economic development and government power's legitimacy and accountability. While the institutionalisation of social sciences within African university faculties and departments and special research institutes has been based on the relevance and instrumental value of research and training, this has not happened at the expense of ambitious theorising of development over public policy in Africa. This was evident in the 1970s and 1980s, in particular. Since then, within and after the process of democratisation, even if in a limited form of electoral competition only, the responsiveness of the discipline to African needs and circumstances, endogeneity, has become increasingly important. This has brought epistemological and methodological issues to the centre of policy designs informed by the current African social science knowledge.

The social science foundations of policy research in Africa are characterised by a pluralism of approaches stemming from the different traditions, international and continental networking and rapidly changing political contexts. This pluralism is also evident in institutionalising the discipline and production and use of expertise within it, ranging from special research institutes under the responsible ministries to faculties combining different fields and training programs. Social sciences perspectives provide a multidisciplinary foundation for studying African public policy. Multiple avenues influence practical policy and facilitate cooperation with other sciences like medical anthropology. While social science foundations are essential for public policy, so is its complementary character and compatibility with other relevant disciplines. The active cooperation with development policy agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, domestic and international, has supported public policy's institutionalisation. The increasing attention to the participatory approach has strengthened communities' voice in research and planning directly affecting their lives. Pluralism and

openness to multidisciplinary can enhance innovative methodologies and theorising of African public policy in the future. Of critical importance are the practical conditions of independent social research, resources (in terms of time and adequate infrastructure to do research and publish the results) and academic freedom to access information and data, analyse it and disseminate the findings. These need to be defended and supported in Africa and beyond. Ultimately, scientific excellence is the best guarantor of public policy's relevance and instrumental value for policymakers.

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