



# Undertaking research management: Independence & Relevance

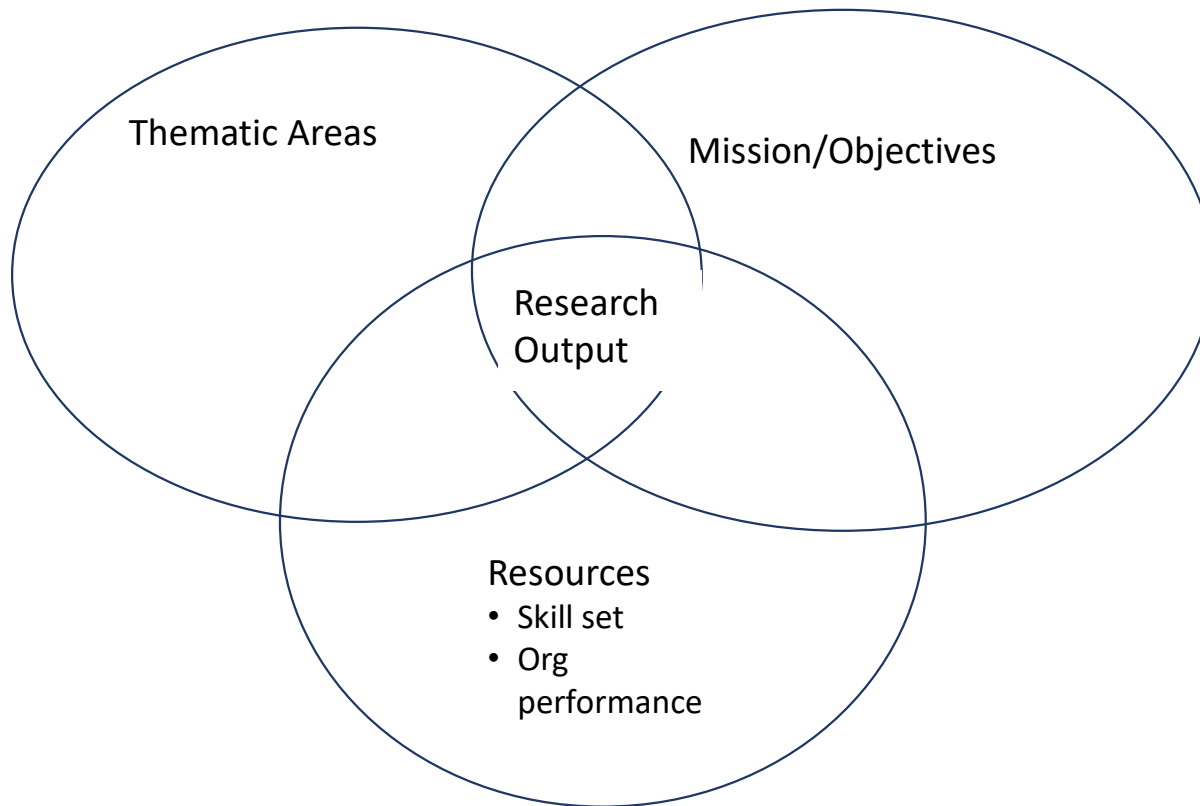
Chukwuka Onyekwena

Executive Director, Centre for the Study of  
the Economies of Africa (CSEA)

# Think tanks and research

- Think Tanks play a critical role in policy making process by providing evidence-informed ideas
- Think Tanks generally provide analytical perspectives to policy issues
- Research conducted by think tanks is expected to be
  - Relevant
  - Rigorous
  - Robust
- The relevance characteristic of think tank research differentiates them from other research-based organisations.

# Think tanks and research II



## Developing the research agenda : Issue-based approach

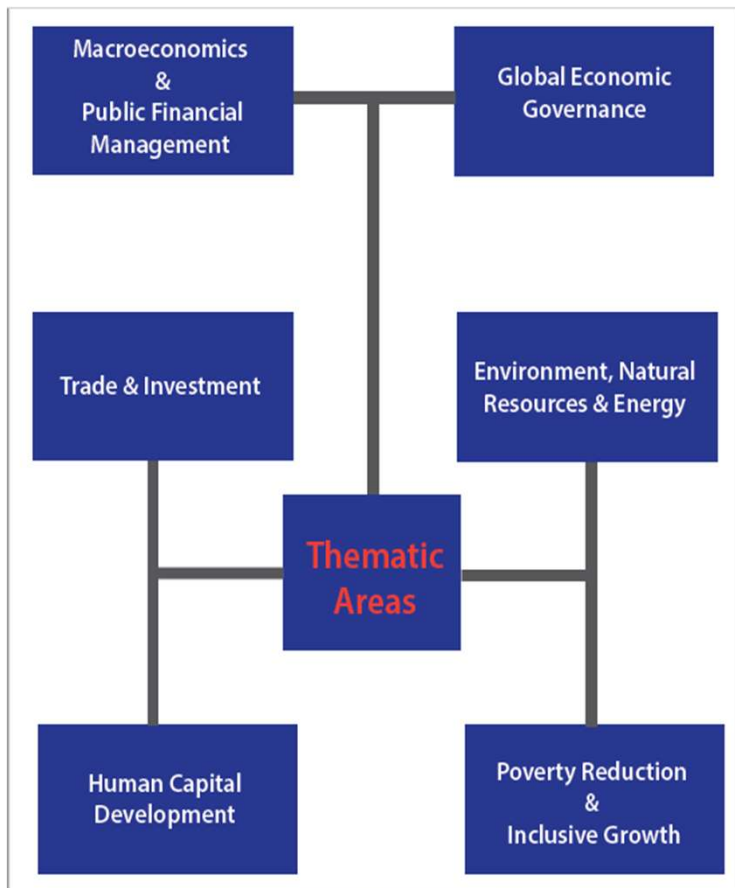
- Basic questions:
  - What are the most relevant policy issues in your region that require evidence and analyses to inform the decisions?
  - Which of these policy issues align with our research areas and mission?
  - Do we have the human and physical resources to work on these policy issues?
- The policy environment is usually dynamic. For example , In Nigeria, the segmentation of the governance structures and the heterogeneity of the society implies that policy decisions are driven by a confluence of various factors.
- Think tanks need to keep track of the policy issues: monitor trends, interact with policymakers, analyze policy documents, etc.

## Developing the research agenda : Issue-based approach – CSEA's experience

- CSEA developed an internal report to monitor activities in the policy space: *Policy Review* - provides a review of the economic/development issues Nigeria, particularly the bills presented at the parliament. The report is circulated amongst senior research staff of CSEA for them to align the research agenda to topic issues in the policy space.
- Interact with policymakers: Consult policy makers to identify potential research areas/topics, refine/re-frame the issues identified and get their buy-in.

Discussion point 1: What mechanisms are employed in your think tank to keep track of the policy environment and align research agenda to it

## Developing the research agenda – Issue-based approach – Illustration



### Topical policy issues

- The impact of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement on SMEs in Nigeria
- Debt Sustainability in Africa post COVID
- Adopting Digital Learning in public Schools post COVID
- The use of Debt-for-climate swaps to promote environmental sustainability
- Economic recovery post COVID: the role of Multilateral institutions
- Is Nigeria's new tax regime pro-poor?

# Developing the research agenda – Demand side

## RFP 1

Increasing access to quality education in Africa

## RFP 2

Women economic empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa

## RFP 3

The Economics of Tobacco Control in Nigeria

## RFP 4

Infrastructure Financing in Africa

## Developing the research agenda : demand side – CSEA' s experience

- CSEA developed an internal report to monitor activities in the donor space: The *Donor Community Review*: documents the recent activities of donors in the region, and highlights the Requests for proposals, upcoming events, and resource guide. The management team uses the review to align their engagement strategies with donors
- Build/Strengthen internal capacity to identify opportunities for research funding, write good proposals, and effective delivery.



# Think tanks and independence

- Think tanks are independent when their views and/or positions are not influenced by the government, political parties, donors, private sector corporations and individuals, etc.
- Independence means that the research agenda and output is determined by the think tank.
- Funding sources can indicate levels of independence: high level of diversity in funding can facilitate independence, and vice versa.

## Funding and Independence: the role of core funding

- Think tanks as well as other have largely been recipients of various forms of core funding.
- Core funding is typically flexible/unrestricted grants provided to think tanks that allows them to choose how (research areas, institutional development, policy engagement, etc.) they wish to spend – promotes independence
- Core funders select organisations that meet certain criteria (governance structure, value proposition, research capacity, policy impact, etc.) and fund them over a substantial period of time.
- Encourage grantees to diversify funding source.
- Examples of core funding source include IDRC – Think tank Initiative, African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF),

# Core funding vs Project funding

Core Funding	Project Funding
Medium/Long term	Mostly short term
Flexible/Unrestricted	Restricted
Supply-driven	Demand driven
Promotes Independence	Can promote dependence

Discussion Point 2: What sort/sources of funding is dominant in your region, and what are your strategies to maintain independence

# Think tanks and relevance

- A think tank is considered relevant when its output, views, or positions are widely recognized as credible, and are increasingly shaping policy decisions.
- Think tank relevance is linked to its credibility, visibility, and policy impact.
- Relevance can be achieved by focusing on key areas of strength and/or diversifying to new/relevant areas.

Discussion Point 3: What are the feasible strategies for strengthening the relevance of your think tank?

# Identity vs Diversifying: CSEA's experience

- In 2017, the Senior research team in CSEA were considering **diversifying** into research areas that are not particularly in line with the Centre's strategic objectives:
  - Peace and Security
  - Climate Change
  - Gender research
- Presented it at the last board meeting for consideration

## CSEA Research Staff: Arguments for diversifying

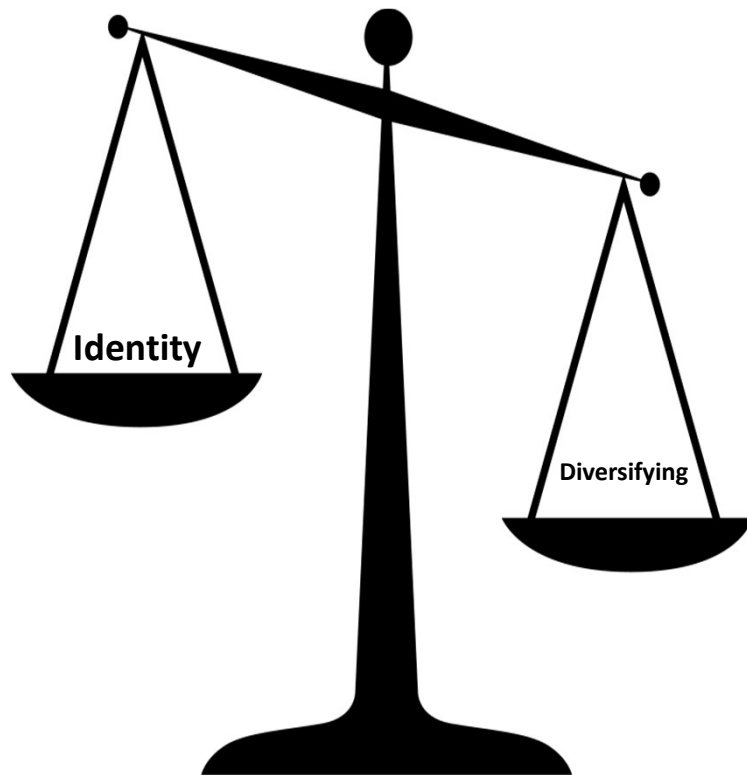
- To remain relevant and financially sustainable, research areas need to be diverse and aligned to the priorities of donors
- The big grants are currently available in areas outside CSEA's strategic objectives
- Concentrating on CSEA's core areas – Public Financial Management and Macroeconomic Management would limit funding opportunities
- CSEA research team is multi-disciplinary oriented and capable of diversifying into several areas without compromising quality

# CSEA BOT: Arguments for identity

- Diversifying into several research areas would mean “spreading thin” – “Jack of all trade and master of none” – CSEA needs to be known for something
- The funding opportunities in CSEA’s core areas have not been fully exploited – BOT to support.
- **Decision:** The strategy should be to cleverly connect CSEA’s competence to diverse research areas – exploring entry points for CSEA’s competence in economic and development research in diverse areas.

# Strategy: Explore connections

## Trade- Off



## Connections

**Identity**

↓

**Entry Points**

- Perspectives in line with core competence
- Exploring intersections

↓

**Diversify**

- Diversified research areas
- Expanding the frontiers of knowledge



## Identity vs Diversifying: CSEA 's Tobacco Control research example

- CSEA is currently well-involved in the tobacco control research – not particularly one of our thematic areas
- CSEA entry point was the taxation aspect: a public financial management issue with health implications – corresponds to the Centre' s research areas
- Other aspects such as measuring economic costs of smoking and measuring price dispersion of tobacco products relate to the Centre' s core competence – most researchers have economics background
- By finding connections between tobacco control research and the Centre' s core competence, CSEA has become the major research organization working in the are in Nigeria/Africa – the work on tax simulations was attributed to change in tobacco tax policy in 2018.

# Wrapping up

- Undertaking policy-relevant research require mechanisms to continuously examine the policy environment and provide evidence-informed perspectives
- Maintaining independence is a desirable objective for think tanks. But independence can be influence by the funding landscape. Flexibility funds can promote independence.
- Relevance can be strengthened by striking a balance between having and identity and diversifying.
- BOT can work effectively with the management to protect identity

Discussion Point 4: What roles can the Board members play in maintaining independence and relevance?

Thank You