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Think Tanks and Democratisation in South Africa

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Abstract

As policy and research institutes, think tanks have advisory and monitoring mandates that could be channelled towards consolidating democracy. Yet, although South Africa has some well-established think tanks (WETT), their presence has not translated into enhancing race relations and living conditions. There is therefore the need to explore why these institutions have been unable to sufficiently influence policy and practice, mainly in the area of social cohesion and socio-economic welfare. It is against this backdrop that the paper looks at the evolving nature and works of two WETTs. The paper considers their capacities and challenges in strengthening race relations and social protection. Proposing a persuasive argument for the creation of an enabling environment, the paper draws from political theories in suggesting ways of enhancing a vibrant think thank sector in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords

Think Tanks; South Africa; Democratisation; Social Justice

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Introduction

Since its transition into democracy in 1994, South Africa continues to experience major setbacks in the area of enduring racism, poverty, and inequality (Buccus 2021; Moll 2021; Moosa et al. 2021; Rossouw & Greyling 2021; Sihlobo 2021). Even though citizens have, for decades, adopted different coping strategies, racial tension and largescale deprivation abound. In the end, the ability of any regime to transcend these challenges is dependent on what measures and how well political figures contain, forestall, and manage these setbacks. In pursuit of this objective, the supportive role of think tanks towards substantive political change and social equality (democratization) is critical (Fraussen & Halpin 2017). The role of these organizations is especially relevant in contemporary times as the platform for promoting socio-economic justice is increasingly being dominated by advocacy and partisan agents who seek to drive their narrow agendas (Kelstrup 2020).

In the sphere of political and social studies, very few concepts remain as contentious as the notion of 'think tanks' (Handy 2020). In the main, these institutions may be construed as private institutions, which seek to promote the public interest by churning out ideas to shape policy design and operationalization (Stone 2000). As a result, their activities are tailored towards shaping policy and implementing ideas, in addition to their primary function as knowledge hubs (Savage 2016). This triple role may be summarized as networkers, thinkers, and implementers. Be that as it may, insomuch as some perceive these institutions as neutral agencies responsible for using their research and capacities for the politico-economic advancement of the host state, others conceptualize them as playgrounds used by external actors to reform or stabilize a country's socio-political status quo (Scott 1999; Anderson et al. 2017; Fraussen & Halpin 2017; Nylen 2018). To an avid reader, the claims of the latter might be tempting as most have longstanding relations with external actors, often termed donors. This suspicion is further aroused by grants, which critics argue ensures that the development and implementation of research strategies by these institutions are shaped by the priorities of these donors. In other words, these critics counter the popular romantic notion of autonomous think tanks by passionately asserting that it is these funders who drive the agenda of these institutions, determine what strategy to be used or what information to be gathered to monitor political development in the concerned state (Hearn 2000, 2001).

Still, think tanks have overarching mandates which could be used to influence the framing and operationalisation of progressive policies. As an illustration, the contribution of these bodies towards a racially diverse national leadership and a good socio-economic policy will, on the one hand, promote social cohesion, and on the other, foster economic prosperity through job creation, food security, and quality health care. However, despite the proliferation of these institutes in contemporary South Africa, the marginalization of vulnerable populations and racial tension thrives. This development raises a burning question: what factors hinder these think tanks from *sufficiently influencing policy and practice, mainly in the area of social cohesion and socio-economic welfare*? In seeking answers to this question, the paper surveys in greater detail the evolution, thematic areas, roles played, and challenges faced by think tanks in their quest to influence policies. Nonetheless, inasmuch as all local think-thanks might pursue a common agenda of contributing towards democracy promotion, the exertion of influence or impact across policy spheres may differ, be unequal, uneven at the (sub)national level and within different constituencies. As a result, one must exercise caution in making general claims about the impact of these organizations on political and socio-economic policies.

Nevertheless, since some of the most pressing issues facing South Africa are not so much of its external relations, the paper will limit itself to two well-established think tanks (WETT) engaging in domestic issues. Excluding the present introduction, the paper is structured in three parts: (i) the historical evolution of think tanks in the apartheid regime; (ii) the role they played towards South Africa's peaceful transition into democracy; and (iii) the remote and immediate factors that have contributed to their continued growth

in numbers. This is followed by an overview of the contemporary activities of two think tanks and their influence (if any) towards an inclusive society and social assistance. Under this discussion, focus will be placed on the activities and challenges of the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) and the Black Sash. To this end, the contributions and challenges of these two bodies, dominant in these spaces, will be highlighted. Finally, the paper turns its attention to examine the challenges faced by these organizations and what strategies could be used to improve their effectiveness.

The Rise of Think Tanks and Subsequent Growth

Think tanks may be construed as autonomous research institutions that translate academic concepts into policy and practice (Fraussen & Halpin 2017). As compared with some that undertake cross-cutting projects covering good governance, human rights, and women's rights, others adopt a more focused approach (Handy 2020). Nonetheless, understanding the emergence and current role of think tanks needs one to familiarize her/himself with two social movement theories: political opportunity structure (POS) and resource mobilization (RM).

Whereas RM can link the emergence and proliferation of think tanks to the availability of donor funding, POS ties their growing number to the opening up of political space for such institutions to emerge and thrive. A practical illustration of POS could be traced to the gradual emergence of think thanks in the early 20th century when the apartheid regime somewhat relaxed strict regulations governing the formation and funding of such bodies. To a great extent, the viable political space was engendered by increased international pressure for the apartheid regime to transition towards democratic governance and enhance race relations.

After a while, the escalation of human rights abuses between the 1970s and the late 80s, equally fostered RM, with a number of donor agencies providing logistics for the proliferation of think tanks to serve as checks on the powers of the government. Under this era, these bodies fell into two camps: conservatives and liberal/reformists. On the one hand, the reformists advocated for a radical transition to majority rule. The *Black Sash* (previously Women's Defence of the Constitution League) and IRR used study projects, setting up libraries and quarterly journals to highlight the apartheid government's injustices and deprivations faced by marginalised natives. These two bodies, for example, gained considerable financial assistance from international charity organisations such as the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Habib & Taylor 1999).

On the other hand, the conservatives sought to entrench White minority rule. To this end, an egalitarian organisation such as the *Afrikaner Broederbond* launched the *South African Bureau of Racial Affairs* (SABRA) as an alternative to the IRR and Black Sash. Although disbanded, the Bureau was the intellectual power-base of the apartheid regime, as members of the Institute used research, conferences and lectures to provide ideological justification for racial and socio-economic discrimination against non-Whites.

The ideological differences of these two distinct groups were most evident in the 1970s, which was a watershed for civil agitation. To be exact, the 1976 Soweto massacre launched renewed awareness of the suppressive system of government under which the majority of the Black population lived (Hlongwane 2007). In terms of RM, the media reports of atrocities perpetrated against women and children which found their way into western media mobilized the international community to not only impose economic sanctions on the country but channel considerable financial support to local organizations interested in pursuing the anti-apartheid agenda (Taylor 1990). As a consequence, external funding witnessed a considerable increase in post-1976, with Norway and Sweden as the lead actors (Habib & Taylor 1999). This effort led to the international isolation of the apartheid regime with the imposition of sanctions and nine-year financial support from the US and Europe totalling $340 million to think tanks and other reformists till the end of the transition process (Hearn 2000, p. 817).

But, regardless of the enormous contribution made by these external actors, there is still a paucity of data on the specific amount given by each country to think tanks, not least in light of the covert nature of that assistance. This global support was complemented with domestic assistance from civil associations, residents' associations, cultural, women's and youth associations, trade unions, and religious groups. A disproportionate percentage of this domestic assistance was channelled to recently released political prisoners, activists with 'struggle credentials' (having been engaged in the anti-apartheid struggle), and young graduates to form think tanks to survey and devise strategies to overcome segregation and racial domination (Gurney 2009).

Still, although, the airing of the massacre (in the Western media) attracted widespread solidarity for the liberal or reformist institutions, these institutions faced considerable hurdles on the ground. Primarily, the political system was neither enabling nor democratic for the institutions to flourish, specifically as the tax regime, security, and legal environment were unfavourable to their activities. When in fact the state excluded some from major policy processes and co-opted others into silence, few continued in their anti-apartheid agenda. Two of these organisations which constantly pushed back the government's repression are the IRR and Black Sash.

Having said that, the palace coup that was orchestrated by F.W. de Klerk, which led to the overthrow of PW Botha in the early 1990s, opened up many political opportunities with the removal of latent restrictions on the operations of reformist organizations (Hopkins 2003). For example, the state repealed the 1978 Fundraising Act (FA) that imposed restrictions on the ability of these think tanks to source external funding (Habib & Taylor 1999). This development also gave impetus for the proliferation of new think tanks. In the lead-up to negotiations for majority rule in 1990, the prevailing racial blocs of anti-and-pro-apartheid organisations somewhat became hazy, as pro-apartheid organizations began to cross the carpet to the opposing camp (Habib 2005). Since the country's first democratic election in 1994, the previous friendly-hostile relationship on racial lines seems to have further eroded, with new relationships forged more on Left-Right ideological lines. To some extent, the shift indicates that a change in a system of government often affects the relationship of institutions that seek to safeguard human freedom and welfare.

Yet, despite this new freedom, many think tanks were still in dire financial stress as (domestic and foreign) donors redirected their resources to the post-1994 Mandela administration. There has not been a detailed account of this turn of events to the extent that it affected the operations of these institutions. There is uncertainty over how much funding was rechannelled to the state, how much was lost by these organizations, and to what extent this setback redefined their priorities. To provide needed resources to struggling organizations, parliament adopted the 1997 Nonprofit Organisations Act (NPO) as a means of assisting those with valid audit records (Hendricks & Wyngaard 2013).

Subsequently, registered think tanks were granted tax exempt status with the reform of the tax regime in 2001, and the National Lottery Commission and National Development Agency were formed to provide extra financial support to these organizations (Heinrich 2001). This was complemented with the establishment of a unit in the Department of Social Welfare to coordinate the relationship between government and think tanks. Thus, the transition to democracy in 1994 was accompanied by an improved political, financial, and legal environment, which has fostered and encouraged the growth of think tanks, and collaborative engagement with the government. In most instances, those who receive support from the state, and those outside this bracket, but with relevant expertise, are often approached by the state to provide advice on a social problem or to undertake monitoring and evaluation of projects (Hearn 2000). Occasionally, this undertaking attracts the attention of donors who may approach a competing organization or private consulting firm to carry out a similar exercise to supplement the efforts of the state.

But should one be worried about this 'cordial' relationship between the institutions and state? Responses to this question can be grouped into two camps. To the first camp, an overly friendly relationship could compromise the ability of these institutions to tailor their research towards scrutinizing the operations of

the government and to address the needs of marginalized communities who might not be on the priority list of the state (Hendricks & Wyngaard 2013; Almiron 2017). By being recipients, these organizations may embark on research commissioned or mandated by the state, which in most cases will seek to justify rather than critique the government's (in)action on issues relating to budget monitoring, extractives, and women's rights. Reflecting this, many think tanks have shifted their agenda towards issues relating to abstract notions of socio-economic rights, with few focusing on the question of state accountability, which has not fared well in contemporary times. The second camp, however, contradicts the opinions of the first group by arguing that such partnerships with the state can strengthen policy influence as politicians treat with suspicion recommendations advanced by institutions perceived as critics (Habib & Taylor 1999; Habib 2005). Regardless of these contentions, the contemporary political environment is certainly more enabling than in the pre-democratic era. As a result, by the end of 2019, there were 92 registered think tanks in South Africa, making the country a hub of the largest number of think tanks in the African region (McGann 2020).

In sum, changes to the normative and institutional frameworks have to a greater extent encouraged the operations and proliferation of think tanks in the country. But has the sheer increase in number contributed to their influence in shaping and enhancing democratization? In seeking an answer to this question, the next section will assess some of the detailed activities of two think tanks, analysing what impact they have had on democratic consolidation, and what militates against their continued influence in this regard.

The Primary Roles of Think Tanks

Since transitioning to a democracy nearly three decades ago, the rainbow nation has experienced the challenge of appreciating the contributions of think tanks, and what impact they could make to the country's political and economic landscape. Are these institutions relevant or do they hold the potential for shaping democratic discourse and improving standards of living? Since embarking on the journey towards becoming national institutions, the country's think tanks have directed their resources to three activities: knowledge creation, policy advice, and monitoring of government programs. These functions establish their legitimacy and credibility as they aspire to set standards for others across the region. Of these three roles, this paper is focused on the monitoring role and on how think tanks seek to use research and advocacy to promote two fundamental principles of democracy: social cohesion and public welfare. But before that, there is a general description of the three roles of these bodies.

At the top level is policy framing. A high percentage of think tanks continue to provide cutting-edge analysis and recommendations for improved decision-making and operationalisation. This speaks to their core mandate of providing technical advice to (non)state actors on the procedures and strategies for overcoming democratic challenges. The institutes channel internal resources (secured through grants) to examine crises and develop diverse approaches to communicate their recommendations to power holders, democracy activists, and practitioners. This role serves as an entry point to building norms and sometimes institutions, which progressively stimulate debates around ways of consolidating the country's democracy. The resulting communication channels help in establishing a set of aspirations and ideals between society and authority, thus shaping the conduct of government.

The second level is the electioneering process. By serving as the bridge between academe and practitioners, these institutions participate in drafting policy, conducting training workshops for personnel, and monitoring the voting process. Their role in providing technical expertise and as impartial observers has often contributed to enhancing the transparency and legitimacy of local elections as the suitable means for handing over political authority and power in a democratic state like South Africa. Through their research and training workshops provided to traditional leaders, opinion leaders, members of major political parties, bureaucrats, and pressure groups, these institutions play a key role in the successful transition of power and resolving problems of factionalism within particular political parties.

The third level of influence for think tanks is in watch-dogging. In their capacity as purveyors and repositories of knowledge, think tanks serve as external reviewers of the democratization efforts of the government. In applying their expertise to monitor the state's compliance to basic tenets such as the rule of law and separation of powers, these institutions provide a third-party evaluation of the conduct of the executive, members of parliament, and the judiciary in promoting or hindering access to justice and in promoting of fundamental rights of marginalized people. Under this discussion, they may engage in discussions with relevant state agencies or use litigation to improve the conditions for the constituencies they represent.

To better illustrate this contribution, the following analysis situates it within the context of two specific think tank case studies. These allow clear-cut analysis of thematic areas of focus, primary activities, and challenges that hinder aspirations. Although it would have been useful to discuss all the registered institutions, due to limited space the focus here is on the two selected think tanks, that continue to use research and advocacy to foster social cohesion and socio-economic welfare.

THE INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS

Ranked as the 25th top think tank in sub-Saharan Africa, the IRR has a long tradition of working towards racial cooperation (McGann 2021, p. 76). Established in 1929, the Institute produced research and policy papers relevant for national, provincial, and municipal administrators in the apartheid era (Heyman 1972; Rich 1981). Following the country's transition into democracy in 1994, the IRR (2021) continued to pursue its objective of fostering racial liberalism. It is presently affiliated with a number of universities, individuals, religious and social organisations. In spite of the fact that its leadership composition somewhat lacks an element of diversity, the president and vice-presidents are arguably some of the most liberal-minded individuals in contemporary South Africa (IRR 2021). The presidential position is occupied by Russell Lamberti, with Theo Coggin and Roger Crawford as vice-presidents (IRR 2021). In seeking to enhance social cohesion, the body has continued to conduct surveys and scientific research, producing publications, lectures, and conferences in thematic areas (IRR 2021).

Despite its noble ambitions, the body is handicapped by a lack of funds. In the early years of its formation, it was heavily funded by the Rhodes Trust, the Phelps Stokes Fund, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Hore-Ruthven 1937). Unfortunately, in post-apartheid South Africa, these substantial contributions have been replaced by crowd financing, with modest support from individuals and private entities such as Julian Ogilvie Thompson, Johannes van der Horst, and Lombard Insurance Company (IRR 2021). More devastatingly, the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has further plunged the Institute into debt, forcing it to close its library and offices in Johannesburg (IRR 2021).

A reader will agree that regardless of one's profession, it is often difficult to excel in a resource-scarce environment. Funding shortages bedevil the group, undermining its ability to undertake rigorous research, or frame novel strategies capable of realising the overarching mandate of addressing racial discord and strife (IRR 2021). This setback is most visible in its public invisibility, explicitly in terms of limited outreach activities such as seminars, lectures, pamphlets, and funding of young graduates for fellowships or postgraduates' research on racial cooperation (IRR 2021).

More disturbingly, due to the limited resources, the think tank has not been energetic in initiating some kind of national dialogue, nor has it paid close attention to race relations. It is, therefore, not ironic to witness the disintegration of race relations in post-apartheid South Africa, with major political figures engaging in harsh racial rhetoric and slurs (Nkrumah 2018a). Whereas inter-racial tensions are latent in most communities, they escalate in the lead-up to elections or parliamentary debates. Illustrations from four key figures might suffice. Whilst the founder of the main opposition party (the Democratic Alliance) was temporarily suspended for alleging that colonialism had its merits, the then-presidential aspirant of the

ruling African National Congress (ANC) and current *Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs*, equally asserted that the land of native Africans had been looted and stolen by Whites (Pather 2017; IRR 2021). Further, in the course of a campaign, the current president came under the spotlight for decrying that the deprivation faced by indigenous people has its roots in the destruction of their asset base by persons of European ancestry (IRR 2021). Perhaps, the most scathing outburst came from the fiery leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), Julius Malema, who rode on the populism of seeking to give back to Black communities the land looted by Whites (Nkrumah 2021a).

The IRR has not been successful in preventing these inter-racial tensions and in positioning itself as a body that policymakers could look up to. Nor is it engaged in framing a comprehensive strategy to forestall similar tendencies among the citizenry. Because of that, one could conclude that the influence of the IRR in enhancing social cohesion, or in simple terms, racial tolerance, in post-apartheid South Africa has not been impressive. It is, therefore, imperative the Institute consider alternative means of intensifying its research capacity to effectively engage with national and municipal actors in enhancing social cohesion. Such engagements could be deepened with rural education and courses for policymakers on race relations. In a nutshell, the current predicament of the IRR seems to suggest that a viable political environment and favourable political opportunity structure are not sufficient to guarantee the robustness of the Institute. Arguably, the opportunities need to be complemented with more extensive resource mobilisation, as it currently relies on limited funding to run the daily operations of the Institute and its staff.

THE BLACK SASH

The Black Sash institute was borne out of a series of demonstrations in 1955 when the apartheid regime sought to disenfranchise a section of the 'coloured' population (Burton 2010). Following an initial unsuccessful attempt to secure a majority vote for the amendment of the constitution, the National Party sought to increase its representation in parliament by enlarging the Senate (Nkrumah 2018b). To contest this cynical action, the Women's Defence of the Constitution League was launched. Composed of a small intrepid group of (White) middle-class women from Johannesburg, the body organised a range of political activities, including demonstrations across major urban centres, collecting signatures for petitions, organising vigils and marches, and wearing black sashes (Bank 2019). The sashes which finally gave the group its current name 'The Black Sash' were used to signal mourning for the looming breach of civil rights (Ambrogi 2018). By the 1980's the institute had widened its agenda and joined forces with marginalised communities in pressing for universal suffrage, equal rights, and an end to discrimination (Burton 2010).

Naturally, the country's transition to democracy in 1994 necessitated reforms across many different facets of the country's political and socio-economic landscape. The Black Sash was no exception. It embarked on two key reforms: first, to diversify its membership; and second, to shift from political to social protection. Needless to say, this focus has remained to this day (Torkelson 2020). However, although it works towards poverty reduction and inequality, much emphasis is placed on social security for the most vulnerable, mainly women and children. In its 2019 submission to the UN General Assembly, the institute alluded to its mission of ensuring access to social assistance (cash transfers or grants) for every impoverished person (Black Sash 2019). This aspiration is drawn from section 27 of South Africa's 1996 Constitution.

A major component of Black Sash's strategy is research, training, and advocacy (Black Sash 2019). Even though the body has made some strides in the first two strategies, perhaps its notable achievement is in the realm of advocating for good governance in the payment of social grants (Jili & Maloka 2019). In 2012, the Minister of Social Development (MSD) contracted a service provider, Cash Paymaster Services (CPS), to oversee the disbursement of social assistance over five years. But this privatisation of the payment system resulted in unlawful deductions and plunged many into dire straits (Black Sash 2019). Following an application by an aggrieved party, the Constitutional Court in 2014 nullified the contract and ordered a re-

run of the tender process (Constitutional Court, *All Pay vs SASSA* 2014). Having failed to comply with the order, and the (invalid) five-year contract with CPS coming to an end, it was evident that there was great uncertainty among the grant-recipient community.

Against this backdrop, the Black Sash in March 2017, again approached the Constitutional Court with a request to grant an order obliging the MSD to ensure a seamless transition to a new payment system, without interrupting beneficiaries' allowances. The Constitutional Court upheld the claim at the eleventh hour, and extended CPS's contract (though invalid) for another 12-month while consultation was ongoing for the nomination of a new service provider (Nkrumah 2018b). Certainly, the Court's decision was a landmark victory for the institute and the constituency it represents, as the delay or non-payment of social assistance could have had a devastating effect on recipients and their dependants (Adesina 2020).

Unlike the IRR, the Black Sash has attracted considerable financial support from local and international partners. Aside from the Australian High Commission, it receives funding from the Foundation for Human Rights, London School of Economics, Open Society Foundation, and the Old Mutual Foundation. Its latest report indicates that the institute has a healthy financial backbone, with a surplus of R856,318 (approx. US$59,000 at the time) after expenditure (Black Sash 2019, p. 30).

Nonetheless, it appears that sufficient resources (RM) alone without political influence over the relevant government department would not be sufficient in bringing about the needed policy or institutional reform to enhance the welfare of its constituency. For instance, the use of an adversarial approach (through the court), rather than dialogue or lobbying symbolised a hostile relationship between Black Sash and the Department of Social Development. Over time the institute is likely to seek avenues to rehabilitate its relationship with the Department, as litigation can have its demerits. As highlighted in the failure of the Department to comply with the Court's initial decision, continuous hostile engagement can induce non-cooperation from the government department, and undermine the socio-economic entitlements of the citizenry the institute represents.

In addition, an important subject overlooked by the institute is the exclusion of a disproportionate percentage of the population from accessing this social assistance. To be eligible, a person needs to meet at least one of five criteria, that they are either under 18 or over 60, that they are a war veteran, disabled or are a caregiver (Nkrumah 2021b, p. 126). As might be expected, this benchmark excludes a disproportionate percentage of the population, for the most part, the able-bodied unemployed, and expectant mothers (Nkrumah 2019a). Giving the dietary requirements at the time of pregnancy, Black Sash ought to broaden its scope and advocate for the inclusion of this sub-population in the conventional cash transfer system. Such intervention could be channelled towards the nutritional needs of the mother-to-be and her foetus, and to the health of new-borns.

More disquietingly, it was hoped that the Black Sash would use its resources to advocate for the introduction of a universal basic grant (UBG) following the closure of the Covid-19 related R350 social relief of distress grant in March 2022 (Ensor 2021). Although the grant has been reinstituted, the body has withdrawn to the background in terms of ongoing debate about the launch of the UBG (Nkrumah 2020, 2021b; Gilili 2021; Peters 2021; Schüssler 2021). To help establish the UBG, the institute ought to adopt a multi-pronged approach of blending litigation with lobbying and in-depth research for a better understanding of how funds could be mobilised for such an initiative.

Having identified some of the specific challenges faced by these think tanks, the next section turns to consider some of the general problems shared by a disproportionate percentage of think tanks across South Africa. Aside from the age-old problem of financial constraints, there is a prevailing barrier of intra-think tank ideological contestation on the one hand, and ideological conflict between think tanks and the state. The extent to which these setbacks militate against institutional effort for democratisation and social justice is elaborated in the next section.

Challenges confronting Think Tanks and Strategies to Address Them

Similar to the apartheid regime, the evolution and influence of think tanks in contemporary South Africa are still dependent on the two key variables: RM and POS. In most instances, the absence of RM (funds for relevant logistics) and dissonance (lack of POS) between the state and think tanks, or among institutions with similar agendas, could hamper efforts towards attaining the objectives of fostering democratic principles. This section will highlight a few of these barriers.

INSUFFICIENT RM

The first major challenge facing local think tanks is the lack of resources. Indeed, quality research, gathering data, and disseminating research outputs require considerable capital injection, which many lack. Due to this impediment, employees with expertise are often poached to accept positions in academic institutions or international organizations with better work packages, which to a greater extent impact the quantity and quality of research generated (Christoplos et al. 2015). This challenge is experienced by a disproportionate percentage of think tanks, as there is no independent agency responsible for sourcing external funding to support their initiatives.

Although the state provides some financial assistance to registered think tanks, this support is arguably insufficient in light of their important role in democratic life. On that account, continued dependence on external donors seems inevitable. As illustrated by IRR, some have budgets exceeding R30 million (approx. US$2m.) which the state cannot bear alone. To that end, continued reliance on foreign donors becomes important if think tanks are to sustain their staff and maintain their research agendas. For this reason, bodies such as the IRR and Black Sash continue to rely on limited support from Nordic countries and intergovernmental bodies, and they sometimes have to compete for this with many others in the sector.

Within this context, efforts by the African Union through the African Capacity Building Foundation and NEPAD in providing some funding for think tanks in South Africa are laudable (Christoplos et al. 2015). This assistance helps the institutes to undertake research around economic policy, sustainable development, and democratization, but it also excludes emerging initiatives and institutions from equally accessing such grants for their operations.

Conversely, the emergence of many fly-by-night operators (FBOs) is a cause for concern, mainly as they compete with credible think tanks for meagre resources. Despite the fact that some donors may be able to discern which think tank is credible, in some instances the distinction becomes hazy as these profit-seeking institutions (PSIs) and one-man organizations (OMOs) depict themselves as serving the interests of ordinary people. Inevitably, this development requires the (inter)national donor community to undertake a thorough background check of these institutions before awarding grants, and perhaps blacklist those identified as FBOs, PSIs, or OMOs (Hailey 2000).

Moreover, in the process of assisting think tanks, it is imperative for donors not to impose conditions but rather encourage input from the institutions in framing the terms of reference for assistance. Such joint partnerships can play an important role in fostering local ownership of projects, as it induces a sense of guardianship among the local researcher's staff, who will see the project as their own and thus, have a sense of urgency to see it through (James & Caliguire 1996).

More importantly, whilst relying on donor funding is essential, local institutions should also look for exit strategies, as this support might decrease in the coming years, especially considering the global economic impact of Covid-19. Also, with the upsurge of political instability in neighbouring countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and DRC, donors may shift their resources to focus on these countries. Of course, major cuts of core funding from donors in the global North will be devastating for these institutions in South Africa, and perhaps plunge them into disarray. Such a measure will likely lead think tanks to seek

funds from fragmented sources, with its negative impact of short-term contractual basis, loss of timelines, delivery inefficiency, and greater transactional costs. An immediate exit strategy from dependence on international donors will not allow a soft landing for institutions like the IRR and Black Sash (as they mainly depend on such sources).Yet those with strong internal capacities could perhaps transition into traditional research institutions, with income raised for instance from general tender bidding or grant seeking through the National Research Foundation, or through commercializing publications, or by seeking support from local philanthropists and churches.

POS (THINK TANK AND STATE IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION)

Aside from the age-old problem of insufficient funding, some institutions continue to face an ideological clash with the state. Despite, as suggested in the second part of this paper, some progress in calming the adversarial relations between think tanks and post-apartheid government, unfortunately not all has been rosy. Even though they are operating within a less restrictive environment, there still exists some degree of hostility between these two actors, and within the institutions themselves. Aside from the tense relationship between the Black Sash and Department of Social Development, a more evident adversarial relationship is between the government and narrow-nationalist (action) think tanks, such as the Afriforum which draws on its research and advocacy platforms to criticize the government on land expropriation, farm murders, and anti-apartheid issues (Mbolo & Mabasa 2019).

A think tank's ideological orientation, reflected in its homogenous staff and narrow racial focus, can exacerbate conflicts. This is more for Afriforum which is perceived as an agent of the defunct apartheid regime (Vahed & Desai 2021), and as seeking to restore colonial-apartheid rule rather than promote the rights of the (White) minority groups they claim to represent (Modiri 2019). A growing number of state officials are critical of Afriforum's operations, especially in light of their recent tweet of a picture of the old apartheid flag (Head 2019). To a section of the Black community, the flag is a reminder of the atrocities endured during that era (Ke-Schutte 2020). The institute's operations are, thus, treated with suspicion, often placed under surveillance, which to a greater extent limits its ability to freely contribute to national development (Modiri 2013).

Clearly, for power holders, the most suitable partnership between think tanks and the state is one grounded on collegiality. Accordingly, some institutions have to take the route of adopting quiet diplomacy or closed-door negotiations with politicians in finding solutions to local challenges. To achieve the mantra 'local solutions to the local problem', the state and Afriforum must both make concessions. The government must open its doors for the institute to find common grounds for the integration of all South Africans in the country's democratic processes.

But before this can happen, Afriforum must also take a step back and ask whether its distinct research agenda or priorities undermine social cohesion. In pursuit of this, perhaps it might be useful for Afriforum to draw from international best practices and broaden its scope to advocate for all South Africans, regardless of the colour of their skin. This issue deserves some consideration as constructive engagement between the institute and the state may hold some benefits for both. Put simply, Afriforum requires a considerable amount of budget support for sustenance, which the state might be in a position to provide, whereas the former might draw on its research unit to provide much-needed policy guidance on reconciliation and socio-economic reconstruction.

POS (INTERNAL THINK TANK IDEOLOGICAL CONTESTATION)

As think tanks share a common objective of promoting democracy, there exist grey areas of conflict, which need highlighting. Ideological contestation as discussed above does not only exist at the state level but also descends to the local level where think tanks clash based on different ideologies. Even though the

focus areas of these institutions are largely cooperative and mutually reinforcing, their crosscutting themes somewhat create rivalry and tension between some institutions. One such tension worth citing is the case, *Nelson Mandela Foundation Trust and Another v Afriforum* deadlock where the former filed a lawsuit against the latter for the gratuitous display of the apartheid flag (Equality Court 2019).

Indeed, in the pursuit of their objectives, different institutions may adopt different theories and strategies that create internal tensions, thereby militating against the prime objective of collective effort to consolidate democratic gains. This rivalry may also stretch to what approach they perceive is best suited for promoting social justice. Despite the possibility that some might lean towards equal access to state resources as means to enable economic empowerment, others might advocate for positive discrimination (Nkrumah 2019b). Such a contestation could revolve for instance around the Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) as a means to uplift historically disempowered populations (Pooe 2013).

In summary, research, advocacy, and training have been a strong focus of think tanks in contemporary South Africa. The IRR and Black Sash continue to use research and advocacy to foster race relations and social protection amidst a number of challenges. The most fundamental challenges were insufficient capacity for RM and an ideal POS. In terms of the former, it was identified that insufficient funding limits the ability of think tanks to undertake ambitious strategies towards fostering social cohesion, whereas, in terms of the POS, it was evident that adversarial relations among think tanks, and with the state, hampers collective effort towards advancing social protection and race relations.

To this end, think tanks must address three cardinal issues: first, consider novel strategies for sourcing funds; second, manage internal division and cooperate towards attaining a common goal of improving the conditions of all South Africans, rather than a select few; and third, adopt a multi-pronged approach of liaison with the state. In seeking to improve race relations and social protection, think tanks may consider avenues such as conferences and short courses where public officials are provided with insights into why reform is needed, which section of the population ought to be targeted, and how to sustain such interventions. In the end, the role of think tanks in consolidating democracy cannot be disputed, but for them to fully realize their objectives, they ought to consider alternative means of funding, resolve their internal differences and build cordial relations with the state.

Conclusion

South Africa's political capital as a beacon of democracy is gradually depreciating, amidst widespread poverty, racial tensions, and exclusion from state-sponsored social protection programs. This article has argued that to keep its credibility intact, the state must work with non-state actors in framing a proactive approach to contain these challenges. It was observed that in light of their research and advocacy capacities, think tanks could be important partners in this regard. Partnership with, or subcontracting to, these institutions will not only complement the state's limited capacity but also ensure that long-term objectives are not sacrificed on the altar of short-term benefits.

Think tanks are instrumental in the realm of translating democratic ideals into practice. By becoming policy advocates, they straddle the line between state and non-state actors in their role as service providers and technical advisers. Think tanks can offer alternative routes for policy implementation, and more direct engagement in the area of training workshops, or policy guidance for practitioners and state institutions. By using their resources to assess, recommend, and develop the capacities of civil and public servants, these institutions can make a more meaningful contribution to South Africa's democratization process.

Moreover, the research and training provided by these institutions can serve as conduits through which democratisers and practitioners subject the state to account for lapses in race relations and social protection. In reality, the expertise of think tanks such as the IRR and Black Sash could be harvested in drafting social

policies and developing capacities of state agents to ensure that the benefits of these policies are realized for marginalized communities.

This paper, however, finds that while think tanks could collaborate and provide an overarching solution to the country's democratic challenges, they are divided on ideological fronts, amidst insufficient funding. It is especially noted that in light of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and its global economic impacts, it might be important for these institutions to consider alternative sources of funding. For the most part, it is observed that due to deepening cuts to development cooperation budgets, these institutions should consider an exit strategy from donor dependence, and perhaps commercialize their research to raise sufficient funds to support their staff and operations.

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