

**'The Role of African Think Tanks in Accountable Politics'**  
**Governance Assessments for Political Accountability Workshop**  
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**A. Introduction: IDEG and its work**

1. IDEG is a think tank established in January 2000 to contribute to the advancement of democratic governance in Ghana through policy research, dialogue and advocacy, and the development of interface capacities that would enable state and non-state actors in civil society and the private sector work purposely together to consolidate democratic governance.
2. In that regard, IDEG works together with all stakeholders in democratic governance, not just government but also civil society, private sector and all other actors in the political economy of Ghana, including development partners and other international actors.
3. In the nine years and almost a decade that IDEG has been operating, it has carried out activities as a think tank that actively seeks to *advise policymakers, inform public debates* and *influence public policy decisions* or choices in a way that enhances democratic governance.

**B. Democratic Governance as Accountable Governance:**

4. Democratic governance is not just about holding credible and peaceful elections. It is also about creating conditions for achieving accelerated growth, equitable social development and strengthening national cohesion after competitive multiparty elections. The achievement of these objectives within specified tenure of an elected government - four years in the case of Ghana – is an enormous challenge that can best be met through 'accountable politics'.
5. Accountable politics is responsible politics in which both governments and citizens, organized civil society organizations or in other forms discharge complementary responsibilities in order to deliver policy-driven actions and achieve results that improve the lives of people. In that regard, accountable politics is also about discharging government responsibilities and civic responsibilities in such a way policy decisions will be implemented to achieve results that would impact on peoples' lives. Accountability relationships in 'accountable politics' are structured (vertical or horizontal), occur within a formal or informal setting governed by a framework of rules and regulations, and has both a temporal and location dimensions (arena). If governance assessments are to enhance accountable politics, then we need to think more critically about the strategic roles that think tanks have to be play in country-led assessments.

**C. Country-led Governance Assessments**

6. The governance assessments that have taken place so far, using the indicators, measures, and frameworks developed for that purpose, have generated enormous

knowledge and a huge volume of information. The accumulation of knowledge and the evidence that they constitute on what worked or has not worked in democratic governance in the past, including the gaps identified in the discharge of government and civic responsibilities, may have transformed opinions into facts and provided documentation that clearly shows both quantitatively and qualitatively what the performance gaps in democratic governance and accountable politics are and how they could be bridged.

7. The point, however, is that the data generated and the knowledge built are not necessarily bringing about the expected changes in policy and improvements in governance performance wherever the governance assessments took place. The assumption that policymakers – politicians and bureaucrats – will act on the evidence of governance performance gaps by doing things differently has not been proved in practice. Few African governments, I dare to say, have implemented many of the recommendations that ensued out of the APRM governance assessments of their respective countries.

#### **D. Weak Implementation**

8. There is evidence of weak implementation of APRM recommendations across African countries. The reasons given for the weak implementation of governance assessment-based recommendations range from the lack of adequate financial and technical resources to support implementation activities to the competing pressures of time and prioritization as more pressing public goods must be delivered ahead of presidential and parliamentary elections in say every fourth year.
9. Weak implementation of APRM recommendations underscore the persistence of the problem of limited utilization of policy-relevant evidence generated through academic and other research by governments to improve policies and related practices in tackling problems such as corruption and inequalities in the social and economic development in many African states. The problem of weak implementation may also be attributed to the lack of capacity in terms human competencies and institutional mechanisms for doing so. The lack of implementation of public policies that could potentially improve governance performance of African policy makers and bureaucrats raise questions about the role of think tanks in accountable politics in an era of growing governance assessments – both country-led and donor driven.

#### **E. Towards More Strategic Roles**

10. The question is, should African think tanks simply join the production of more indicators for governance assessments and carry out the assessments or should they strategically direct their efforts towards solving the problem of poor utilization of evidence to improve governance performance? I think the experience of IDEG is instructive to the answers to this question.
11. As a think tank IDEG considers its active efforts at *advising policymakers* in government and in the legislative arm of government as a civic responsibility. So are its actions aimed at *informing public debates* though critical analysis, knowledge

networking and explanation of political, social, and economic development phenomena on radio and in other media spaces discharge of important civic responsibilities. Often, the progress that think tanks make in these areas is not matched by what they achieve in the sphere of *policy influence*, where the use of credible data or evidence is crucial to alter thinking and behaviour, including the creation of institutional spaces for the practice of accountable politics. It takes something else, in addition to statistical and other information, to achieve policy influence. In the political economy of Ghana, as elsewhere, it is even more challenging for think tanks to influence policymakers and their decisions, as they often have to compete for space and attention with more powerful actors – international, national and local - spread across all levels of governance and domains of governance.

12. Few illustrative examples will suffice, however, in showing how emergent as they appear, African think tanks can strengthen their policy influence roles in governance performance assessments and in the utilization of the data generated to bring about policy changes and improvements in the living standards of the people. The first point to make is that African think tanks should not be viewed simply as knowledge actors but also 'organizations that seek to operationalize data and ideas in order to shape policy (Diana Stone 2001). IDEG has had firsthand experience in seeking to operationalize data and ideas in order to influence policy decisions.

## **F. Illustrative Cases**

13. In the *formulation of NGO policy in Ghana, promotion of credible and peaceful elections in Ghana in 2008*, and in securing institutional space for civic actors to participate in high-level policy dialogue on aid and development effectiveness in Ghana, IDEG found that it took not just evidence but the use of such data to frame the strategic policy problem and propose strategic solutions (concept and practical measures) to shape policy decisions. For *NGO policy* it successfully facilitated consultations, dialogue and consensus on the principles, institutional mechanisms and policy framework for NGO regulation in the country. The document that was jointly produced in October 2000 and December 2004, respectively, had effectively become the standard by which prospective legislation to regulate NGOs in Ghana is assessed.
14. Similarly in the closely contested presidential and parliamentary elections of December 2008 and January 2009, IDEG used the concept of citizens and the electorate as owners of sovereign mandate of government to effectively secure a role for civil society actors in the management of the elections. Hitherto, elections management had been the preserve of the Electoral Commission and the political parties and civil society actors were excluded. For the first time in 2008, the Electoral Commission also held consultations and dialogue with CSOs on issues that put the credibility of the presidential elections at risk and sought collective solutions to them.
15. Finally, harping more on the role of an organization that seeks to operationalize ideas and shape policy, IDEG successfully led interested civil society actors into dialogue with heads of multilateral missions and development organizations in Ghana and

lobbied the Government of Ghana to cede institutional space to civic actors in there high-level Consultative Group Meeting where accountability dialogue occurred on aid and development in the country. In 2006, IDEG as a think tank, working closely with a coalition civil society organizations named the Growth and Poverty Forum achieved a significant breakthrough in securing representation and participation in national and international dialogue on aid and development effectiveness in Ghana.

## **G. Conclusion:**

16. In conclusion, I have argued that in the light of the growing vocation of governance assessments – both country-led and donor-initiated – and the accumulation of knowledge democratic governance performance gaps, African think tanks should ponder over what roles they could play to advance accountable politics. Accountable politics requires policy-driven actions and results that impact positively the lives of the people. However, such actions and results cannot be effectively achieved in so far as policymakers – both politicians and bureaucrats – fail to use the knowledge and data generated through governance assessments to change policy and ensure effective implementation. There is evidence that governance assessment data generated through the APRM exercises in several African countries are not being utilized as expected, as many of the recommendations are not being implemented.
17. The lack of implementation of recommendations and for that matter the use of evidence to shape policies and attendant practices calls for a more strategic role by think tanks. It is time for them to use their capacity to draw on the evidence on governance performance gaps to develop and operationalize ideas that will shape policy practices. African think tanks can team up with university researchers, consultants and several other actors who are actively engaged in the domain of governance assessments to strengthen their mutual capacities to influence policy decisions and their implementation. In addition to generating knowledge, capacity to think and operationalize ideas and professionally communicate and interact with bureaucrats and politicians as independent and credible actors is a strategic resource that think tanks must utilize more effectively. This is the lesson of IDEG.

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