



Meridian17

The Missing Middle

why the study and support of business needs to be included in the African-European focused Think Tank landscape



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Executive summary

The think tank landscape on African-European cooperation is comprehensive in its coverage of, firstly, high-level strategic, geopolitical policy work and research; and secondly, in the area of social and community development. There is a crucial and largely neglected area of focus and work that lies between these two, namely business. Specifically, there is a gap in our understanding of how business shapes and enables the attainment of strategic policy outcomes and how it can drive social and community development. In this short paper, we briefly examine this gap in the think tank landscape and unpack some of the implications of its existence.

For Meridian17, this gap or neglected area of focus is what we refer to as the “Missing Middle”. This is where business realities, the market, operational and regulatory conditions interact with policy, and determine whether economic growth, employment and prosperity follow. When we measure the health of economies and economic cooperation through GDP, employment rates, or investment flows, we are measuring the output of business. The existing landscape of think tanks that deal with African-European cooperation rarely take a business centered approach in their analysis.

GDP, employment, and investment are, at their core, measures of how well business is able to operate. Understanding policy through that lens is the ‘Missing Middle’.

Introduction

In this short paper, we demonstrate that it is unique for a think tank to take a business lens in driving policy discussions to stronger cooperation between Africa and Europe. As such we occupy an important and as yet unfulfilled aspect within the wider African-European think tank ecosystem. We are pleased that we can contribute to the work of our peers, complimenting existing work, and avoiding duplication of efforts as we meet this gap. Crucially, this positioning creates natural partnership opportunities with the broader think tank community.



Ultimately, Europe and Africa can only grow stronger together if they work together – and when we say ‘work’, we mean business.

Three lenses

We adopt three key ‘lenses’ with which we view the work that we undertake. Firstly that of Systems thinking. Systems thinking is broadly the way in which businesses, as social entities, interact with their environment. This is a holistic view, which encourages building an understanding of how different parts of a system come together, interact and influence each other.

In this ‘lens’, we see that business, policy, socio-economic conditions, government and even think tanks themselves are all part of broader systems. These systems may exist at all levels, the local, country, region, continental, or supranational level.

The second lens is Stakeholder theory. We loosely borrow this lens from business, and apply it to our context with some imagination. Freeman, drawing on systems thinking inter alia, developed Stakeholder theory in response to “the quantity and kinds of change which are occurring in the business environment” (Freeman, 1984: 5). This is not dissimilar to what we see in the world today. The theory broadly refers to the need for businesses to act in a responsible way to all stakeholders that they engage with – going beyond a focus on shareholders alone. Local communities, customers, the environment and suppliers all form part of the broader stakeholder landscape.

Following the ethos of Freeman (2020), we adopt the principle of “The power of ‘and’”. Our work is not framed with an ‘either, or’ mentality. Rather, we seek collaborative creation of value. We operate in cooperation with other think tanks and with business directly, seeing this cooperation as the most effective tool to drive change and impact.

The theory calls for a focus on value creation, and improved well-being for those entities all interact with an organisation. We strongly believe in this focus on cooperation and partnership.

Finally, the third lens comprises the fact that business is the predominant social construct where desired change, as conceived in theoretical discussion and ultimately codified in policy changes, materialises. It is business that implements and is affected by policy changes. It is business that generates employment, creates opportunities for skills development, benefits from and innovates for a healthy society, it is business that profits directly from economic growth. When businesses operate across borders, they provide a natural vehicle for cultural exchange, for the building of bridges between regions. When policies are crafted to support business, we can drive real impact – both economic and social – and see meaningful change arise.

This third lens is what sets us apart from existing think tanks most clearly. Where others view policy through core questions of “Does this make sense for the strategic objectives?” or “What are the best policies, given strategic objectives?”, we are supported by our first and second lenses in asking ourselves the following question in

all that we do: “What makes most sense for business?”

Mapping Africa/EU think tanks.

In Figure 1 we have endeavoured to map the existing think tank landscape across Europe and Africa along two axes: geographic focus and thematic orientation, where the latter runs from strategic policy focus to social development. When we map the major players across these axes, a clear pattern emerges.

The current distribution of think tanks reveals that the Europe/Policy quadrant is densely populated. In Europe, organisations such as BIG and ODI Europe occupy this space with depth and authority. We see that the ISS and SAIIA are key actors in the Africa/Policy quadrant, while the ACF and ACET for example are active in the Africa/Development sector. Finally, the ECDPM and Friends of Europe have well-served the Europe/Development quadrant.

The following section offers a brief analysis of the mission and remit of the organisations positioned in Figure 1. The source references and office locations are compiled in Annex 1. What is immediately striking when reading across these self-descriptions is how consistently each organisation defines itself in relation to

Figure 1



either the policy debate or the development agenda - rarely both, and almost never through a business lens.

Policy focused, Europe Centred

This is the most densely populated quadrant. BIG was established in 2022 expressly to serve as the first Brussels think tank wholly dedicated to geopolitics and strategy, working closely with decision-makers from both the public and private sector. ODI Europe brings research and dialogue from the wider world into the European policy debate, deliberately

engaging the EU’s neighbourhood while remaining sensitive to political realities in Brussels. Bruegel and CEPS occupy a more economics-oriented corner of this space - Bruegel with a focus on improving the quality of economic policy through open, fact-based research, and CEPS as a long-established forum for EU policy debate with an extensive international network. The SWP (German Institute for International and Security Affairs) sits at the interface of research and direct advisory work, providing analysis to the German government, the Bundestag, and bodies including the EU and

NATO. What is notable across all of these organisations is that business, where it appears at all, does so as an object of policy - not as a lens through which policy is examined.

Development focused, Europe Centred

ECDPM describes itself as a “think and do tank” with a clear orientation towards inclusive and sustainable development in the Africa-Europe relationship. The emphasis is firmly on policy influence through dialogue, research and partnership. Friends of Europe similarly centres on good policymaking through multilateral collaboration, explicitly drawing in voices from government, business and civil society. It is worth noting, however, that business engagement in both cases is one component of a broader dialogue model - it is not the organising principle of the work. The actual output of these organisations reflects this: publications centre on structural and societal change, governance, and sustainability transitions, with business as a context rather than a subject.

Policy focused, Africa Centred

SAIIA is focused on advancing a well-governed, peaceful, and economically sustainable Africa through independent public policy research. Chatham House’s Africa Programme distinguishes itself by its emphasis on the politics of specific African

countries - deliberately moving away from a development-first framing and towards a more differentiated, sub-regional political lens. APRI operates in a bridging role, providing policy insights to both African and EU/German policymakers. The Policy Center for the New South covers economic and social policy challenges for Morocco and the broader Global South, while the Nkafu Policy Institute focuses on Cameroon and sub-Saharan Africa. What these organisations share is a genuine commitment to African-led policy thinking, and what they largely share as well is a distance from the business environment as an explicit subject of research.

Development focused, Africa Centred

The African Climate Foundation operates at the nexus of climate change and development, taking an explicitly African-led approach to systems-level transformation. Its work centres on shifting path dependencies across key economic sectors, with an eye on unlocking new development opportunities. ACET (African Center for Economic Transformation) is notable for its focus on the “how-to” of policy reform - going beyond diagnosis to support actual implementation of economic transformation across the continent, with an emphasis on productivity, diversification and human well-being rather than growth alone. PARI, affiliated with the University of

Johannesburg and Wits University, provides original social science research with an implementation and advocacy dimension for South Africa and the Global South. Across all three, the orientation is firmly towards structural and social transformation - business conditions and market dynamics are relevant, but secondary to the development objective.

The Missing Middle

The middle of this graph is empty. Along the north-south axis of Europe-Africa, the middle represents those organisations and institutions that have a focus on both, without (over)representing the interests of either of them. Along the east-west axis of development-policy, the middle represents business and other stakeholders that act independently and without the need for developmental assistance, but that stop short of actively determining the policy frameworks in which other stakeholders

exist and operate.

The void in the centre of our map indicates a reality we see in the output of the work of existing think tanks; the question of how business environments, market conditions and the way these interact with and influence regulatory frameworks and affect policy outcomes is, for the most part, only partially represented. This is problematic as it points to a missing dimension in how we think about policy. From a Systems Thinking perspective, it means that we are not addressing the full system in our current policy conversations. From a Stakeholder Theory point of view, there is the glaring absence of a key stakeholder – which has implications for value creation, particularly in this current geo-political moment.

Reconciling the middle

Policy development naturally focuses primarily on the interests of the political body that develops it. European policy on cooperation with Africa simply has to factor in electoral realities of the continent, which in recent years has warranted a strong policy focus on “stopping migration”. Furthermore, as a consequence of the disintegration of the

existing world order, EU policy will likely be more inward facing in near future. The same is true for African policy on cooperation with Europe. As such, we do not believe the geographic, north-south centre of our think tank landscape can be occupied by a think tank that works with a policy lens. It would be too easily drawn to either side. The same is true for the development lens. Development is

uniquely one-directional, where one party provides development aid, to the party in need of development.

At the true centre of our think tank landscape lies society, positively or negatively influenced by policy. In this centre, geography carries weight, but is not a limiting factor. In this centre the 'rubber' of policy and the efforts of development 'hit the road'. Here, policy is implemented, circumnavigated or worse, here it stops business in its tracks. In both directions – development and policy – business is required to understand the

field, to interpret and act on policy and to be able to articulate what development should come first to advance its needs. As such, this is where policy can get stuck, where developments can fail to deliver the impact it was crafted to achieve. As such, the true centre of our landscape, our Missing Middle, is not just a research or academic gap but a key missing component of understanding policy efficacy.

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The case for including business (Or, why should we care?).

As a final argument for including business, we ask our reader to consider that many of the metrics that are used to determine the success of markets, of policies, of interventions, are essentially metrics determining the outcome of business endeavours. Governments, development agencies, and international bodies judge economic progress by these key outcomes. Among others, these include GDP and GDP growth, industry statistics, employment rates, productivity numbers, investment rates, and more recently statistics on digitalisation and innovation. Collectively, we have come to accept that these

economic metrics point to the stability and robustness of markets – and contribute substantially to our understanding of societies as a whole.

Employment levels are an indicator of the willingness and ability of companies to hire, but equally point to the ability of citizens to provide for themselves, to sustain cultural and social bonds, and of the successes and failures of political strategy. We see investment and metrics on innovation as signals of a viable economic opportunity, but they also represent benchmarks of the success or limitations of economic, fiscal and foreign affairs policies and the way in which we as citizens relate to this

environment – and are willing to take risks. What is important is that when these numbers move, it is because something has changed in the business environment: regulation, taxation, infrastructure, access to capital, rule of law, market structure and in the case of African economies often sentiments and prejudices.

We recognise that business is nested in a policy and regulatory environment. We must also recognise that business is a stakeholder within that environment, a stakeholder that will either work with or around policy and the regulatory environment to achieve its goals. Studying this stakeholder, its behaviour, its needs and requirements and unique focus, within the policy and regulatory environment, allows the environment to adjust appropriately. Ultimately, Europe and Africa can only grow stronger together if they work together – and work means business.

Conclusion

We have seen a structural gap in the African-European think tank landscape, and view this as a critical impediment to the success of policy initiatives. Businesses are central actors in society, and need to be given a more active voice in policy discussions that aim to strengthen European-African cooperation. We believe that our work at Meridian 17, centering

business in policy and development conversations and research, will bring additional depth to the conversation about what policy can and should achieve. In doing so, we can drive more effective policy and see increased impact and value creation.

References

Freeman, R. E. 1984. Strategic management: A stakeholder approach. Boston: Pitman.

ANNEX 1

Organisation	Self-description (source)	Offices / Notes
ECDPM	"We are ECDPM – a leading independent 'think and do tank' that wants to make policies in Europe and Africa work for inclusive and sustainable development. We have two offices: in Maastricht and Brussels." (ecdpm.org/about)	Brussels & Maastricht
ACET	"We focus on the 'how-to' of policy reform, going beyond the traditional role of a think tank to ensure our research is accessed by the right people at the right time to accelerate the transformation agenda. In our view, growth is not enough. Africa must also transform through diversified production, competitive exports, increased productivity, upgraded technology, and improved human well-being." (acetforafrica.org/about-acet)	Ghana
APRI	"It researches key policy issues affecting African countries and the African continent, and provides insights to the German and European Union policy making process on Africa. APRI also conducts research that can provide policy options to African policymakers." (afripoli.org/about)	Berlin & Abuja
Policy Center for the New South	"The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the global South." (policycenter.ma)	Morocco
BIG	"The Brussels Institute for Geopolitics (or BIG) exists to help Europe get in shape for the new era of great power politics. It is the first and only think tank in Brussels wholly dedicated to geopolitics and strategy. Founded in 2022 with the backing of several EU leaders, the institute works closely with decision makers from the public and private sector." (big-europe.eu/about)	Brussels
SAIIA	"The South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) is an independent public policy think tank advancing a well-governed, peaceful, economically sustainable and globally engaged Africa." (saiia.org.za/about)	Johannesburg & Cape Town
Nkafu Policy Institute	"The Nkafu Policy Institute is a nonpartisan, independent think tank... Its mission is to provide independent, in-depth and insightful policy recommendations that advance the Cameroonian economy and the economies of other sub-Saharan African countries." (nkafu.org)	Yaoundé, Cameroon
PARI	"PARI is an African research institute affiliated to the University of Johannesburg and Wits University, providing new and original social science research, advocacy and implementation support for South Africa, the global South and beyond." (pari.org.za/about)	Johannesburg
Friends of Europe	"Friends of Europe is an independent think tank with a difference. We are passionate about good policymaking... We believe that pioneering ideas and effective policies stem from breaking down silos and building communities of trust between policymakers, business leaders, civil society representatives and individual citizens." (friendsofeurope.org/mission)	Brussels

Organisation	Self-description (source)	Offices / Notes
ODI Europe	"ODI Europe brings research, ideas and dialogue with the wider world into the European policy debate. We address critical priorities while staying attuned to European policies and processes. Breaking down inward-looking trends, we are sensitive to political realities." (odi.org/en/about/our-work/odi-europe)	Brussels (EU-facing)
SWP	"The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) advises the German government and parliament on questions of foreign and security policy. We are one of Europe's largest foreign policy think-tanks, conducting independent, practice-driven research. We also advise decision-makers in relevant international organisations such as the European Union, NATO and the United Nations." (swp-berlin.org)	Berlin / Brussels liaison. Not primarily Africa-focused.
Chatham House Africa Programme	"Most Africa-related research conducted elsewhere is led by developmental concerns. While development is an important component of the work of the Africa Programme, it is our political and sub-regional focus that makes us special... We firmly believe this is essential to sound decision-making." (chathamhouse.org/africa-programme)	Africa-focused, not EU-Africa cooperation specifically.
IAI	"We are a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. We seek to promote awareness of international politics and contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation." (iai.it/en/institute/about-us)	Rome. Covers Africa and Asia.
African Climate Foundation	"The transformation of African economies requires impact at a systems level to shift existing and future path dependencies... We believe that climate change interventions have immense potential to unlock new opportunities for development in Africa." (africanclimatefoundation.org/mission)	Cape Town
Bruegel	"Established in 2005, it is independent and non-doctrinal. Bruegel's mission is to improve the quality of economic policy with open and fact-based research, analysis and debate. We are committed to impartiality, openness and excellence." (bruegel.org)	Brussels (EU economics focus)
CEPS	"Founded in Brussels in 1983, CEPS (Centre for European Policy Studies) is a leading think tank and forum for debate on EU affairs, ranking among the top think tanks in Europe... researchers conduct policy research across a diverse array of areas." (ceps.eu/about-ceps)	Brussels

