

# 25 years of REPOA's experience in policy research and capacity building

Over the past 25 years since it commenced its operations in 1995, REPOA has become a signature think tank in Tanzania due to the unique roles it has played in policy research and capacity building for researchers and diverse research users. Policy research plays a significant role in public policy discourse and development planning around the world. This is evident in the presently developed countries, which commands nearly half of the global share of over 11,000 think tanks. Sub-Saharan Africa has only 6% of these think tanks. Like the rest of African countries, Tanzania have only few think tanks, in the form of independent research organizations, university research bureaus, and specialized sector-based research agencies. REPOA is among the few independent research organizations or think tanks that has occupied an active space in the evolution of policy making in Tanzania and in the broader evolution of the development paradigm since its commenced operations in 1995.

Working with its associates, collaborating institutions, and its various beneficiaries and supported by various partners over the years, REPOA has contributed to the national efforts in enhancing policy research capacity, in expanding the scope of research-based evidence in policy development, and in promoting policy dialogue involving different actors. This article summarizes three broad outcome areas of REPOA's work, among many others, over the past 25 years.

## Capacity Building in Policy Research and Analysis

At the time of REPOA's establishment, the major policy concern was persistent poverty, despite years of policy efforts and interventions by the government since independence and throughout the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. At the opening of the workshop on research on poverty on the 11th of January 1994, the then Minister for Science, Technology and Higher Education, late Benjamin William Mkapa stated that one reason for persistent poverty could be that, while the interventions were well-intentioned and called for, the ground may not have been well set and the implementation may have been impatiently pursued. He proposed, as quoted from his speech "... there has been, and there continue to be, insufficient researched studies as firm background to the plans and interventions for the eradication of poverty by government, NGOs, and Donor agencies in developing countries such as ours". The research on poverty alleviation was therefore seen as pivotal for long-term policy actions to sustain momentum for tackling poverty. However, national capacity for undertaking policy research required attention and a different approach. This was well put in the speech by Mr. J.Yzermans, Counsellor at the Royal Netherlands



REPOA's Executive Director Dr. Donald Mmari bids farewell to the former Vice-President of the United Republic of Tanzania, Her Excellency Samia Suluhu Hassan, after launching the 24th Annual Research Workshop on 10th April, 2019 in Dar es Salaam. In the background are the former Deputy Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Education Dr. Maria Semakafu and the Norwegian Ambassador to Tanzania, H.E. Elisabeth Jacobsen. H.E. Samia Suluhu Hassan is currently the President of the United Republic of Tanzania.

Embassy in Dar es Salam, as quoted "... the essence of these new research programmes is to place research in a more structural framework and to tackle the reinforcement of local research capacity in relation to the development problems over a long period of time using an institutional approach".

The first mandate of REPOA during its establishment was therefore to build, strengthen, and maintain local capacity and intellectual culture to develop independent research agenda and to conduct independent research into alleviation of poverty in Tanzania. REPOA's capacity building programme was structured to include both learning by doing and tailor-made trainings. The former involved providing research grants under the Open Competitive System (OCS). In this system, researchers were also encouraged to team up with senior researchers to facilitate the learning process, augmented by rigorous mentoring at different stages of the research. A stringent quality assurance system, including anonymous peer reviewing, open seminars, and oversight by the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) strengthened capacity development and ensured high quality outputs that were eventually published and increasingly demanded in policy dialogue forums, including the Annual Research Workshops. The thematic focus during the first five years of REPOA programme were on the link between poverty and public policies; poverty-environment linkage; role of technology in poverty alleviation; gender issues and poverty; and social-cultural determinants of poverty. These thematic research areas have evolved every five years to reflect the evolving economic and social structure and the ensuing policy outcomes in the country, and in consideration

of other relevant factors at regional and global levels.

Tailor-made training programmes were offered to young researchers and those engaged in policy analysis on research methodologies, exploratory data analysis, and writing skills. Overtime research-user skills such as budget analysis and expenditure tracking became increasingly important in REPOA's portfolio. This experience resulted in a collaborative post-graduate diploma programme on poverty analysis, run jointly by REPOA, ESRF, and the Institute of Social Studies (presently affiliated with Erasmus University Rotterdam). The programme was funded by UNDP and was offered for eight years, benefiting may mid-career professionals. Many of the beneficiaries of REPOA's capacity building activities can be traced at successful careers in academic institutions, international development agencies, NGOs, and the government. REPOA has since continued to provide tailor-made trainings embedded into the research programmes, such as research methods and techniques for data collection using new technologies. There are also additional stand-alone trainings for research users, aiming to strengthen and sustain the linkage between knowledge generation and policy, such as the unique training on Evidence Informed Policy Making (EIPM) introduced in 2019 targeting policy analysts, and various media trainings on the data use and dissemination.

## Contribution to National Policy Concerns and International Development Discourse

For any country, the trajectory of development and policies is often influenced by a combination of domestic conditions and the

influence of the global economic and political landscape. Both have changed since independence in 1961 and so has the policy frameworks: From growth and development approach in the 1960s; basic needs approach in the 1970s; to neoliberal policies under Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the 1980s; to poverty focused approach in the 1990s; and to growth, trade, and development in recent years. REPOA's birth coincided with the Copenhagen Summit of 1995 and later the World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) of 1999. These were also followed by the Millennium Development Goals of 2000. The concerns on unsustainable debt led to the tying of debt relief to the preparation of acceptable Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) based on the CDF from 2001. At the national level, the emphasis on SAPs gradually faded away, as policy concerns were turned to address poverty through the National Poverty Eradication Strategy (NPES) in 1997 and the Tanzania Development Vision 2025 in 1999. NPES was a medium-term strategy that outlined causes of poverty and policy actions for delivering desired growth targets and reducing income poverty by 50% by 2010. The Vision articulated the desires to eradicate abject poverty and achieve a middle-income status by 2025. Once again, it is easy to note that the establishment of REPOA coincided well with these policy concerns over poverty, placing research priority on various dimensions of poverty.

The Tanzanian PRSP was developed along with a comprehensive national poverty monitoring system in 2001, which provided room for independent research and analysis and set aside research funds to support monitoring of PRS implementation. The activities and the

research fund were managed by the Research and Analysis Working Group (RAWG) of the National Poverty Monitoring System to which REPOA functioned as the Secretariat. Its outputs informed PRS progress towards its targets and proposed policy changes and interventions based on research findings. Research gaps and priorities were identified through a consultative process that made its research very relevant and the resulting outputs very influential to the policy development processes. One of its key outputs were the biennial Poverty and Human Development Reports (PHDRs). The first PHDR (2002) provided an overview of the status of poverty by following the progress against targets set in the PRS indicators, analysed geographical disparity of poverty, urban poverty, the macro-micro linkage, and vulnerability. It called for the deeper understanding of the nature and quality of growth and its transmission mechanism to reduce poverty and vulnerability. The dialogue that followed led to the development of second generation of poverty reduction strategies that started to address growth concerns, and hence the title National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (NSGRP I), popularly known as MKUKUTA, with three clusters of growth and income poverty; quality of life and social well-being; and governance and accountability. REPOA's research programme (2004-2009) was geared to addressing poverty alleviation in the context of broader issues of the nexus between growth and poverty; agriculture and environment; vulnerability and social protection; and socio-political and cultural issues. Governance, technology, and gender constituted important cross-cutting agenda. REPOA's research became increasingly aligned to addressing fundamental policy needs for identifying constraints to economic growth, enhancing productivity and quality of growth, enhancing transformative potential of social protection, and promoting governance reforms to enhance accountability and service delivery for sustainable poverty reduction. These contributed to gradual shifts towards national strategies in which growth was recognized as an important driver of poverty reduction.

Further studies illuminated the nature of rural growth, employment and labour productivity, demographic factors, and conceptualization of the link between economic and social policy. Deeper understanding of generalized insecurity and conceptualization of in-formalization influenced the thinking towards a view that social protection can contribute to transformation by strengthening the human and system capabilities and productive competencies. In 2009, studies renewed the policy discourse on active industrial policy, specifically on the role of the state in a developing market economy. The fundamental proposition on developmen-

tal state stressed the importance of a clearly defined vision, a long-term development strategy, maintaining macroeconomic stability and ensuring good governance, along with a strong political leadership and competent civil service. The MKUKUTA II, a successor development framework for 2010/11-2014/15 and the First Five Year Development Plan (FYDP) 2011/12-2015/16 embraced some of these elements, stating the significance of well-functioning institutions and markets, good governance, and economic efficiency promoted by public investment in key infrastructure and public-private partnerships. These continued to underpin the Second Five Year Development Plan (2016/17-2020/21).

Over the past two decades, the economy has grown and sustained positive economic growth. However, the concerns on the linkages to poverty reduction continued to dominate policy debates, promoting the view that structural transformation is necessary for inclusive development. A major concern over emancipating the remaining poor from poverty is the transformation of agriculture and the rural economy, where most of the Tanzanians lives and derive their livelihoods. This concern is an old challenge with which the leadership has grappled since Independence through a series of reform experiments. The challenge of transforming agriculture and the rural economy continue to be high on REPOA's research agenda. The objective is to achieve a high productivity and competitive agricultural sector driven by smallholders, complemented with a well intermediated interaction between smallholders and large-scale farming. The research carried out on various value chains such as coffee, sugarcane, cashew nuts, sisal, and horticulture indicate that transformation of agriculture can be realized through innovative institutional and organizational arrangements that address binding constraints, by reducing transaction costs, facilitating technology transfers for production efficiency, and integrating producers into competitive value chains. REPOA's current research programme extends its previous analytical work to the drivers of effective structural transformation, including strategic use of natural resources; skills and job creation; institutional and policy environment for competitive productive sectors, including agriculture, industry and trade; addressing the challenge of informal economy; accountable and inclusive governance for equity and transparency; citizen participation and local economic development; transformative social protection and gender equity; and environment, climate change, and technology. All these are crucial, as the country prepares its Third Five-Year Development Plan and of necessity, seek to sustaining the momentum toward higher levels of the Middle-Income Status.

### Support to Local Government Reform, Enhanced Citizen Participation, and Local Economic Development

The local government reform agenda in Tanzania began in 1996, aimed at streamlining central-local



His Excellency Dr. Phillip Mpango, former Minister for Finance and Planning, pose for a group photo with some workshop participants, moments after officiating the opening of the 22nd Annual Research Workshop in April, 2017. On his right is REPOA's Executive Director Dr. Donald Mmari and on his left is Professor Lant Pritchett, a keynote speaker at the event, followed by the former Head of European Delegation to Tanzania, H.E. Roeland van der Geer. H.E. Dr. Phillip Mpango is currently the Vice President of the United Republic of Tanzania.

government relations within the broader context of public sector reforms for improving public service delivery. The reform agenda was translated into the Decentralization Policy Paper of 1998, which desired decentralization by devolution (D by D), implemented through the Local Government Reform Programme (LGRP). The reform addressed devolution of political, administrative and financial decision-making powers and duties from the central to the local government levels. Consistent with the D by D policy framework, REPOA's research on local government and service delivery in the late 1990s and the subsequent collaborative research programme with the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) of Norway on local govern-

ment reforms from 2002 to 2012 provided significant inputs into the local government reform process. The ten-year programme followed the implementation and development of the reforms with a view to documenting processes of change and impacts of the LGRP I and II, and to provide key stakeholders with feedbacks and lessons learned from implementation of the reform.

Policy decisions by some local government authorities (LGAs), and the linkages between governance and accountability benefited much from the research implemented by REPOA, and no doubt by other individuals and organizations. Research provided information on the drivers of power and the institutional process underlying the

budget process and participatory planning at sub-district levels. Further research in this area has continued to inform the government and other non-state actors on areas where decentralization policy has worked well and where challenges remain that requires further strengthening and policy reviews. The Government responded well to various recommendations and have undertaken various initiatives aimed at enhancing participation of citizens at local level, improving social service delivery, and promoting local economic development (LED). These initiatives include the recent review and consultations on the national decentralization policy, and the Regional and Local Government Strengthening Programme.



Former Prime Minister of the United Republic of Tanzania, Hon. Mizengo Peter Pinda, displays to the audience some of the publications of REPOA, including Poverty and Human Development Reports at a past event. On his left is Prof. Esther Mwaikambo, former Chairperson of the Board of Directors of REPOA.

### Conclusion

This article indicates two crucial factors often understated or ignored. First, the credible and relevant research forms important part of the development process. Second, over the past two decades, research has played greater role in influencing policy than was the case in the past, serving as an intermediary between government policymaking and citizen needs. Policy making process has increasingly become more dynamic following the forces of globalization, changes in global governance and global political economy, and rapid evolution of technology that demands strengthening of the bridge between research on one hand, and the quality and effectiveness of the policy making process on the other.

The emergence of covid-19 pandemic and its resulting disruptions to economic activities and effects on health and welfare worldwide is likely to provoke new economic and social order that brings both challenges and opportunities. Among the challenges includes slow growth, and increased inequality, poverty, and vulnerability. The opportunities include new market opportunities, potentials to expand intra-regional trade, and domestic production of basic medical supplies. The accelerated spread of information, the increased demand for openness and transparency, the increasing complexity and technical nature of policy issues, including the integration of global and regional commitments, the increased societal demands for elected government and public officials to deliver development results to the citizens and the non-state actors, and the need for timely and concise information and analysis will require more research and evidence to make policy actions well informed and properly targeted to meet these diverse demands.

REPOA has responded well to the policy and development needs of Tanzania in line with current developments in the country, and those reflected in the regional and international development agenda, such as East African Community Vision, Agenda 2063, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To confirm the strength of REPOA's research and its contribution, the 2020 survey of think tanks implemented by the University of Pennsylvania ranked REPOA 4th among 92 participating think tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa. The support from the Government of Tanzania and development partners has made the contribution of REPOA possible and visible over the past 25 years. Core development partners at different times during the past 25 years are the Embassies of the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Ireland, the United Kingdom's International Development Office, and the Canadian Centre for International Development Research. More years of such a focused contribution calls for continued collaboration and further investment in research, from both public and private sectors to sustain independent and credible research over the foreseeable future.