

## EDITORIAL

### Science Academies: Process and Values of Academy Work Virtues of Academy Advice

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Science Academies, Universities, Research Institutes, Interministerial Committees, Consultants and more serve as advisory bodies to national governments, national and international organizations and corporations. The quality/rigour of advice from these bodies is not the same. By virtue of their nature and characteristics, science academies are in a position to provide more robust advice. What follows is derived from Chumbow (2008), and Mbab (2008, 2009, 2011).

The Virtues of Science Academy Advice are founded on six major pillars:

- i) Core values governing the activities of the Academy, which usually include independence; relevance, integrity, objectivity, and quality;
- ii) Design of the study within the *niche* of the Academies;
- iii) Quality and diversity of experts involved in the study. Typically, experts on the study committee represent multidisciplinary, national and international mix, gender sensitivity, expertise (qualification, experience);
- iv) Absence of conflict of interest;
- v) Process of delivery: This usually includes a study/report review (team of reviewers that includes national and international experts, speakers and non-speakers of the study, gender and an overviewer). The output is usually a *consensus study* report based on evidence.
- vi) Level of public confidence and acceptance that the advisory study can command. This depends very much on i-v above.

Given this foundation, Science Academy Advice differs from that of advisory bodies such as universities, research institutes, interministerial committees, team of consultants, etc, by:

- Being strictly evidence-based,

- Respecting the core values of the Academy while advice from other bodies has no set of core values to refer to,
- Being broad-based while that from other bodies is usually within the narrow mandates of such bodies (ministries, institutes, etc.) and
- Being independent.

Governments usually turn to interministerial committees, however. Advice from interministerial committees has its insufficiency given that:

- Composition of committees is generally not determined by merit/technical expertise but by administrative position/political affiliation which at times, may be of very low level,
- Participation at times tends to defend positions of ministries rather than the facts as revealed by evidence,
- The resulting report is not a result of a rigorous process characterized by:
  - Multidisciplinary,
  - Committee composition based on a set of rigorous criteria,
  - Review and overview of the report and
  - Independence.

Given this situation, other departments of government in particular and the public in general may reject in various ways the advice/report. This can happen often in a multiparty situation.

Hence, it is advisable that governments (decision markers) seek Science Academy Advice if general ministerial and public acceptance of decisions on difficult or controversial issues is desirable.

Although few African science academies have a clear mandate to advise government, the role of academies in influencing national policy is growing, thanks in part to the African Science Academy Development Initiative (ASADI). The

need for this service role has been clearly articulated by policy makers at annual meetings organized by African science academies and looking across the content of strategic plans, it is clear that a service role is a desired objective of many African science academies.

What will be needed for academies to effectively perform a role in influencing national policy? Science academies will need to clearly distinguish their unique niche as compared to other organizations. *Because that niche involves the ability to synthesize scientific knowledge and make it available to decision makers in a timely and useable format, service-oriented academies must be independent but must also have strong links with government.*

Perceptions about academies will be strong determinants of whether or not the Academies can deliver effectively from a service point of view. Academies should, therefore, establish and actively promote a set of core values, which should clearly be reflected in the academy's day-to-day operations. For example, the membership of the academies should be diverse, merit-based, and gender balanced. Members of science academies should visibly demonstrate their commitment through active service on advisory committees and taskforces.

African science academies face many challenges in developing the capacity to advise policy formulation. These include the challenges of bringing multiple disciplines together, communicating effectively, strengthening the

quality and use of locally available policy-relevant data, building political will and demand for evidence-based advice, building institutional and human resources capacity, and attracting sustained financial investment from governments, funding agencies and other stakeholders.

## References

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