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Think Tanks in SADC

The Work, the Disruption, and the Pivot

What SADC think tanks do, the four disruptions reshaping the sector, and how research organisations and their funders must adapt to stay relevant and impactful.



ROADMAP

Three Parts, One Argument

Think tanks in the SADC region play a well-defined role in policy life — but that role is under real strain. This briefing sets out what the work involves, what is disrupting it, and what both funders and think tank leadership need to do differently.

01

What Think Tanks Do

The core functions of a think tank, how they differ from academic research, and where SADC's sector stands today.

02

Four Converging Disruptions

Artificial intelligence, institutional mistrust, funding shocks, and regulatory tightening — and how they reinforce one another.

03

The Pivot to Relevance

Concrete shifts for funders and for think tank leadership to protect impact through each disruption.

01 PART ONE

The Work of Think Tanks in SADC

What the job actually involves, how it differs from academic research, and the shape of the sector today.

Turning Complexity Into Usable Judgment

Think tanks exist because no one in government has the time, distance, or mandate to make sense of fast-moving, interconnected problems alone. Their work runs from raw uncertainty to a decision someone can actually act on.

01 Unravel Uncertainty

Separate what is known, what is contested, and what genuinely cannot be known yet — giving policymakers a clear starting point instead of noise.

02 Frame Issues & Set the Agenda

Name problems precisely and put them in front of decision-makers before the range of options has already narrowed.

03 Provide Policy Alternatives

Translate diagnosis into a comparable set of actionable choices, with trade-offs made explicit rather than left implicit.

04 Shape Decision-Making

Brief, convene, and advise the people who actually decide — then track what happens to the recommendation afterward.

PART I

Where Think Tanks Sit in the Policy Cycle

Most think tank output maps onto three stages of the policy cycle — each demanding a different kind of work and a different relationship with decision-makers.

01

Framing Ideas & Issues

Defining the problem, naming who is affected, and establishing why it deserves attention now.



02

Providing Policy Alternatives

Setting out a bounded, comparable set of options — each with costs, trade-offs, and evidence attached.



03

Shaping Decision-Making

Briefing officials, convening stakeholders, and building the case for one path over another.

PART I

A Different Kind of Research Institution

Think tanks and universities both produce research — but they are built around different clocks, different incentives, and different definitions of success.

	Academic Institution	Think Tank
What success looks like	Peer-reviewed publication and citation	Uptake by decision-makers and real-world influence
Timeline	Often years, driven by the research and review process	Weeks to months, driven by the policy calendar
Starting point	A gap in the academic literature	A live decision someone needs to make
Output	Journal articles, books, conference papers	Briefs, options papers, testimony, convenings
Independence	Independent of any single client or funder's timeline	Independent in analysis, but tied to what's being decided next



PART I • THE SADC LANDSCAPE

A Young, Resilient, but Financially Fragile Sector

Southern Africa's think tank landscape is comparatively recent, led by national-focus institutions such as SALLA — rated the top think tank in sub-Saharan Africa for three consecutive years — and the Institute for Security Studies, alongside a growing number of national policy bodies across Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, and beyond.

Compared with peers in Asia, Latin America, and Oceania, the region reports more moderate operating conditions and stronger public policy engagement — but sits on the weakest financial base of any region. That combination is exactly what leaves the sector exposed to the four disruptions covered next.

83%

of SSA think tanks were founded after 2000 — a young, still-consolidating sector

84%

focus primarily on national-level policy work rather than regional or global reach

60%

operate on budgets under US\$500,000; 39% run on less than US\$100,000 a year

02 PART TWO

Four Converging Disruptions

Artificial intelligence, institutional mistrust, funding shocks, and regulatory tightening — each reshaping what SADC think tanks can credibly deliver.

Four Converging Disruptions

Each pressure is significant on its own. Together, they compound — and reshape what SADC think tanks can credibly deliver, and what funders and leaders should expect of them.

01

Artificial Intelligence

Commoditizing content production, eroding think tanks' traditional edge in drafting and synthesis.

02

Institutional Mistrust

Office holders increasingly view independent research bodies with suspicion, not partnership.

03

Funding Shocks

Heavy reliance on short-term foreign grants, deepened by aid withdrawals like the USAID cuts.

04

Regulatory Tightening

New NGO and PVO laws expand state power to register, audit, suspend, or dissolve organizations.

01 DISRUPTION ONE

Artificial Intelligence Is Commoditizing Think Tanks' Core Product

Large language models can already produce a passable blog post, literature review, or policy brief — and the output improves every day. This erodes the comparative advantage that used to rest simply on having research capacity others lacked. Yet African think tanks are the least AI-adopting in the sector: only half currently use AI tools at all.

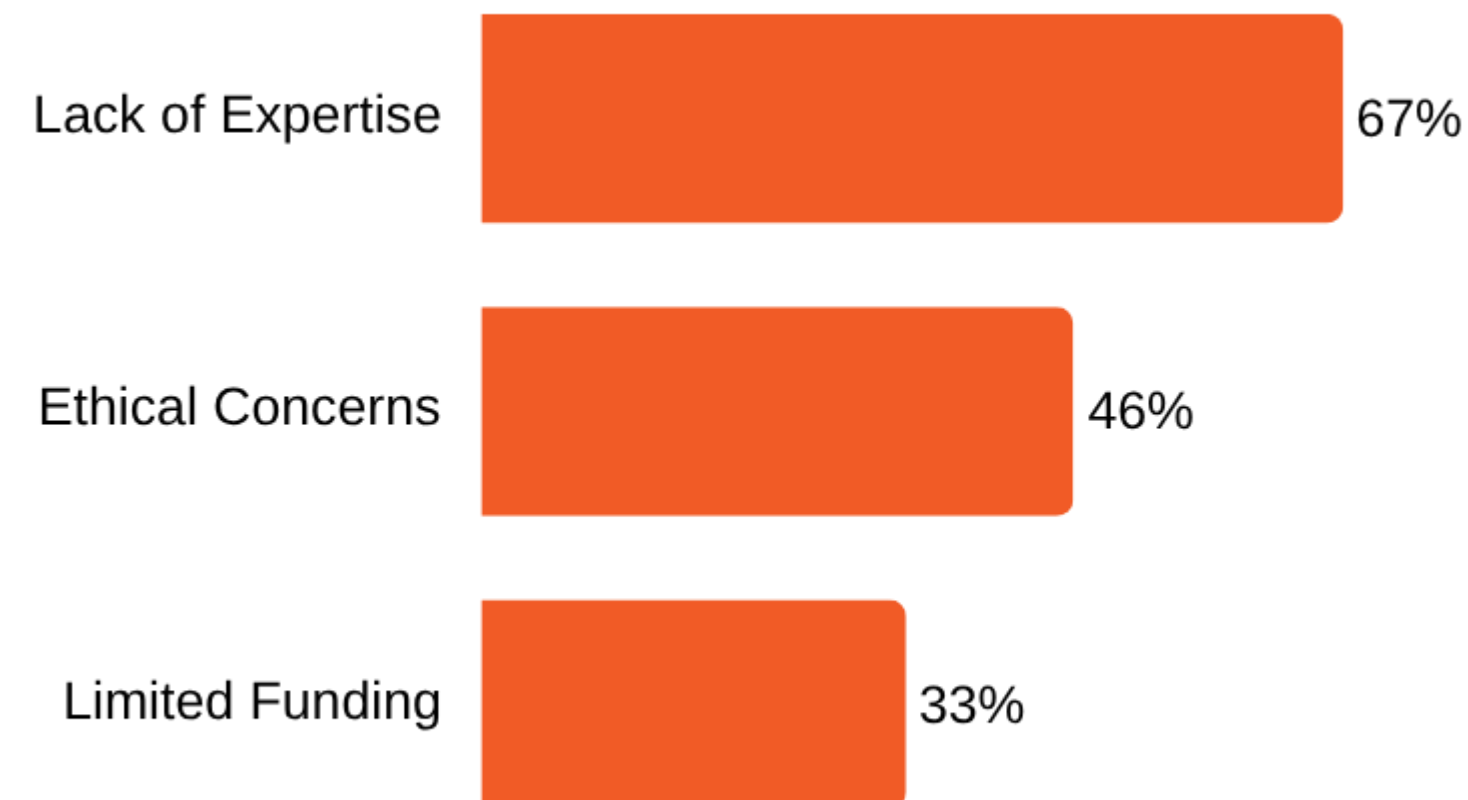
50%

of African think tanks currently use AI tools in their work

33%

cite limited funding as a barrier to AI adoption

Why African Think Tanks Aren't Using AI



Office Holders Increasingly Treat Independent Research as a Threat

Across much of the region, political and security establishments continue to view independent think tanks as agents of “hidden powers” rather than potential partners — a suspicion rooted largely in how these organizations are funded. Where governments do engage, it is often to communicate decisions already made, rather than to genuinely absorb independent findings. This is not uniform hostility — the region reports more moderate political climates than peers in North America or Latin America — but the “foreign agent” narrative persists.

27%

of SSA think tanks describe the current political climate as favorable or very favourable for their work

23%

say political polarization has a significant or very significant impact on their operations

18%

report their research collaboration is barred or heavily restricted across political lines due to polarization

03 DISRUPTION THREE

A Sector Structurally Dependent on Short-Term Foreign Grants

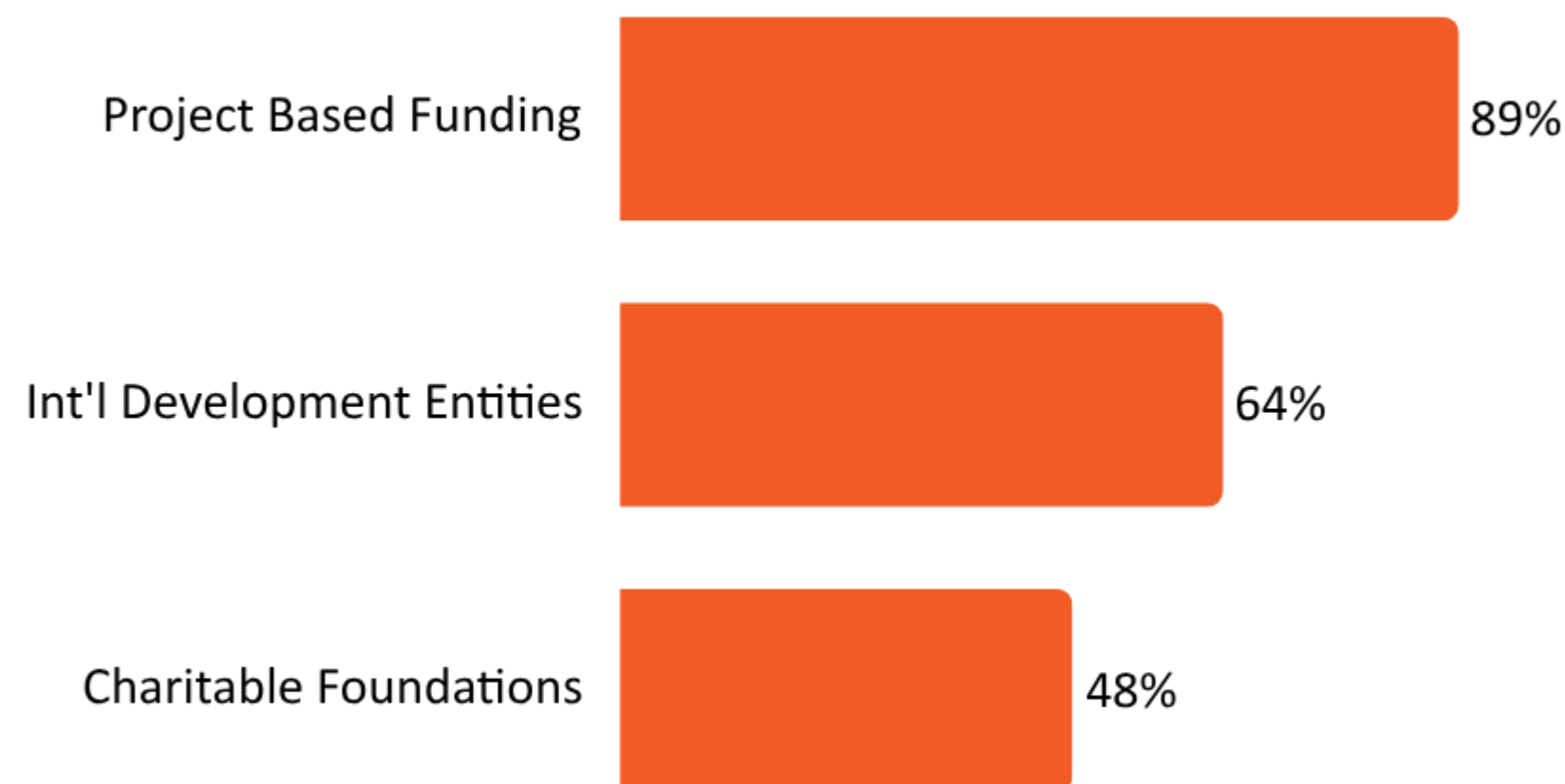
SSA think tanks are the least diversified in the world when it comes to funding sources. Nearly two-thirds of funding comes from international development entities, almost all of it structured as short-term project grants rather than core, unrestricted support — leaving little room for long-term strategy or resilience.

This dependency has already proven costly: over a third of SSA think tanks were moderately to severely affected by the 2025 USAID funding withdrawal — more than in any other region.

37%
moderately-to-severely
hit by the 2025 USAID
funding withdrawal

25%
dedicate zero resources to
fundraising — highest of
any region

Where SSA Think Tank Funding Comes From



04 DISRUPTION FOUR

New Laws Are Expanding State Power Over Civil Society

Regulatory tightening is now a region-wide pattern, not isolated incidents — arriving through formal legislation that gives governments durable legal tools rather than one-off administrative pressure.

Zimbabwe

The PVO Amendment Act, signed April 2025, tightens registration, imposes criminal penalties on leaders, and lets officials audit, suspend, or replace NGO leadership and freeze assets.

Mozambique

A draft Law on the Creation, Organization, and Operation of Non-Profit Organizations would give government sweeping authority to control — and shut down — civil society groups.

Zambia

Existing NGO Act provisions continue to restrict registration and operations, and rights groups have repeatedly called for repeal of the most restrictive clauses.

43 of 50

African countries/territories rated as having obstructed, repressed, or closed civic space in 2024. Even open space is narrowing: Namibia, Mauritius, and Botswana — previously rated open — have all seen civic space narrow in recent assessments.

The term “Agora” is derived from an ancient Greek term and can be used to mean “public space”; “assembly”; or “gathering place”. The African Agora is a platform that seeks to provide an overview of the state of the public space in Africa.

Read more



Tracking the Shrinking Civic Space in SADC

KEY

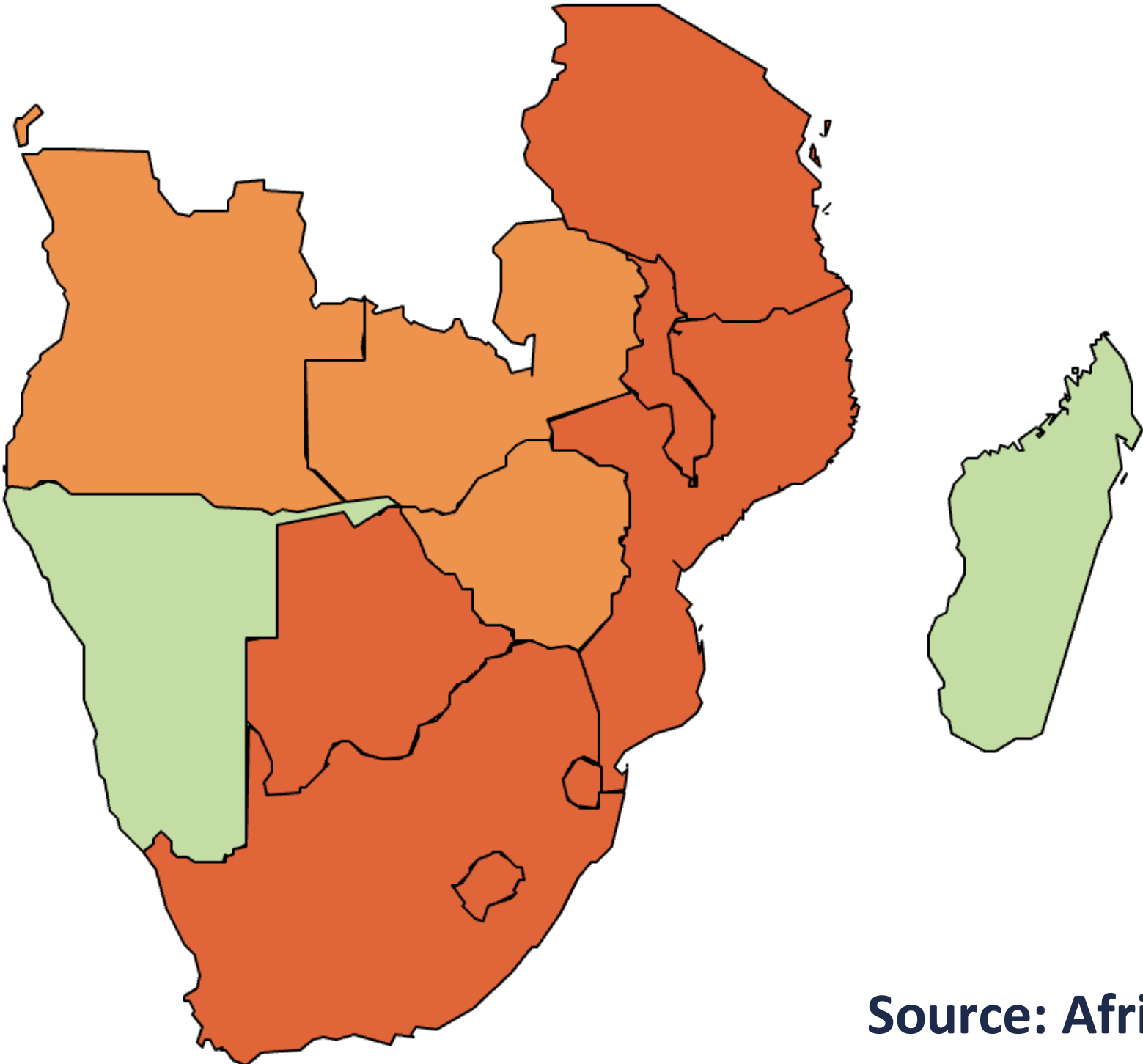
Open

Narrow

Obstructed

Repressed

Closed

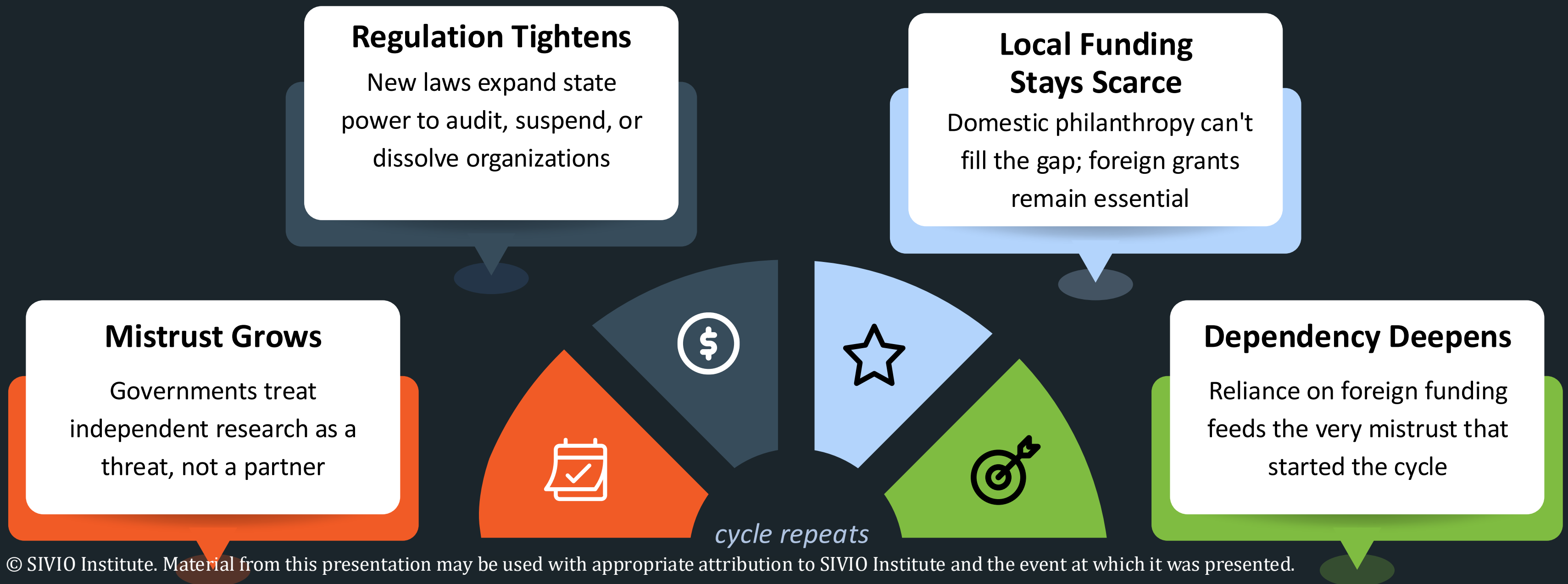


Source: African Agora

SYNTHESIS

The Four Disruptions Reinforce Each Other

This is not four separate problems — it is one reinforcing cycle. Anyone who addresses only one point risks being undone by the other three. AI compounds this cycle by lowering the visible cost of producing research — reducing the perceived need to invest in the very institutions best placed to interpret it responsibly.



03 PART THREE

The Pivot to Relevance

Concrete shifts for funders and for think tank leadership — matched to each of the four disruptions.

01 DISRUPTION ONE — THE PIVOT

Fund Judgment, Build Judgment — Not Just More Content

FOR FUNDERS

- Support AI literacy, not just AI tools — grants for training and internal capacity, not only software licenses.
- Fund “AI constitutions” — back internal use policies that govern which tools are used, how, and with what oversight.
- Protect what AI can't replace — prioritize funding for original field data, political judgment, and trusted convening.
- Reward tailoring, not volume — value think tanks that adapt one finding for many audiences, not undifferentiated output.

FOR THINK TANK LEADERSHIP

- Adopt an internal AI-use policy — define which tools staff may use, for what tasks, and under what human-review standard.
- Reinvest saved time in fieldwork — redirect efficiency gains toward primary data collection and stakeholder engagement.
- Build in-house AI literacy — train researchers and communications staff directly rather than waiting on a donor programme.
- Reposition your value proposition — market credibility, local access, and judgment, not speed of output, as your edge.

02 DISRUPTION TWO — THE PIVOT

Build the Conditions for Trust — Deliberately, Not Reactively

FOR FUNDERS

- Diversify the funding mix — blend international support with local and domestic sources to reduce “foreign agent” exposure.
- Invest in strategic communications — help think tanks frame advice as constructive support to governance, not a challenge.
- Back locally-led governance — support boards and leadership with strong local ownership and credibility.
- Support multi-stakeholder platforms — fund neutral convening spaces outside crisis moments.

FOR THINK TANK LEADERSHIP

- Engage before you need something — establish regular, low-stakes contact with officials outside moments of conflict.
- Control your own funding narrative — proactively communicate a diversified funding base before it's used against you.
- Strengthen local governance — recruit boards and advisory councils with credible local standing and networks.
- Treat communications as core — frame findings as constructive contributions and build public trust through digital platforms.

03 DISRUPTION THREE — THE PIVOT

Shift From Project Grants to Institutional Resilience

FOR FUNDERS

- Prioritize core, multi-year funding — even modest unrestricted grants let think tanks plan beyond the next project cycle.
- Fund fundraising capacity directly — a dedicated grant line for development staff and systems closes a real resource gap.
- Support regional pooled funds — collective, multi-donor mechanisms reduce exposure to any single funder's exit.
- Back domestic philanthropy links — co-fund partnerships with regional foundations and corporate givers.

FOR THINK TANK LEADERSHIP

- Build a dedicated fundraising function — even one dedicated staff member changes the trajectory for most institutions.
- Diversify beyond project grants — explore membership fees, paid advisory work, and core-funding asks.
- Cultivate domestic and diaspora giving — under-tapped sources that also reduce “foreign agent” exposure.
- Build an operating reserve — treat it as a governance priority given proven exposure to abrupt funding withdrawals.

04 DISRUPTION FOUR — THE PIVOT

Fund and Build Resilience Against Legal and Political Risk

FOR FUNDERS

- Fund legal defense capacity — support in-house or shared legal expertise for registration, audit, or compliance actions.
- Back SADC-level coordination — regional advocacy platforms carry more weight against national laws than any one organization.
- Build continuity contingency plans — help grantees prepare for suspension or deregistration scenarios.
- Engage diplomatically, alongside — use donor-government channels to support, not substitute for, grantees' own advocacy.

FOR THINK TANK LEADERSHIP

- Audit legal and compliance readiness — know your registration status and exposure under current and pending laws.
- Join regional coalitions — collective advocacy carries more weight than any single organisation acting alone.
- Document governance rigorously — clean records and financial transparency reduce vulnerability to politically motivated audits.
- Prepare a continuity plan — data backup, alternate legal vehicles, and succession should exist before a suspension event.

CROSS-CUTTING PRIORITY

Protect the Pipeline: Leadership Is Itself a Vulnerability

Every recommendation above assumes a stable, capable leadership team to carry it out. Yet the region's leadership base is itself under strain — underpaid relative to peers elsewhere, and far less gender-diverse — at precisely the moment demands on leaders are compounding.

64%

of SSA think tank leaders earn less than US\$3,000/month; 32% earn less than US\$1,500

18%

of SSA think tank leadership roles are held by women — the lowest share of any global region

Four Steps for Leadership Pipeline Resilience

- 01** Build succession plans so institutional knowledge doesn't depend on one leader
- 02** Fund targeted mentorship pipelines to close the gender leadership gap
- 03** Benchmark and protect compensation where possible — retention is itself resilience
- 04** Watch for burnout as pressures compound — invest in leader wellbeing, not just output

SOURCES CONSULTED

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- On Think Tanks — “Restricted but Resilient: What Sets Sub-Saharan Africa's Think Tanks Apart,” 2025
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