



The Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference 2016

Strengthening University Engagement for Community Transformation and Impact Plenary Session at the Fifth African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Biennial Conference

Concept Note

Background

Since Independence, the role of African universities in strengthening agricultural output, community transformation and rural development has been discussed in many platforms and fora. Universities are traditionally mandated to undertake three main functions: to train, undertake research and, thirdly, to reach out and impact communities with their products. Nonetheless, with a few exceptions, university focus has been predominantly placed on training, and research. Outreach has been largely neglected. Yet Universities, for a number of reasons, are well placed to support rural transformation: 1) Universities often employ a large proportion and number of highly trained staff –in some cases well over half of the scientists within the national science systems; 2) universities continuously generate knowledge to support rural innovation and transformation; 3) universities play an important function of maintaining knowledge including through the curricula that are employed and shared with subsequent generations of scholars that pursue university training; and, 4) students at universities comprise a significant workforce that can support agricultural innovation at farm level, if well guided and supported through various models and approaches.

Agriculture in Africa employs over 70% of its populations and contributes over 30% of GDP. However, annual growth rate (for example, measured by crop yield increases) in the sector has been comparatively low when benchmarked with other continents. A recent study indicated that growth in the sector has been largely a result of increases in land under cultivation, rather than productivity increases. In either case, the rise in number of those in extreme poverty in Africa is of concern. Previous

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policies have relied on the role of extension system within a linear knowledge dissemination paradigm. But extension systems in many parts of Africa have largely collapsed or at least are ineffective, due to lack of incentives to support a knowledge intensive sector. Many degree-awarding institutions in Africa have little or no direct linkages with smallholder farmers and their environments. The relevance and effectiveness of agricultural extension agents is further restricted by insufficient engagement with agribusiness systems and markets. Moreover, the significant pool of technologies appropriate for smallholder farmers is not being broadly utilized. There is also inadequate attention to informal farmer learning models, and such models have often been considered inappropriate or no recognition and/or accreditation given to them. The role of women farmers and the significance of gender in agricultural development strategies and interventions have not adequately been recognized. Universities in Africa need to engage more with rural communities to lesson learn, understudy and support transformation efforts in rural communities. But to do these they need to transform themselves. Fortunately there are ongoing initiatives responding to the above issues. Thus the Biennial 2016 Conference provides opportunity various actors to address some of the above issues, and especially to lesson learn from some of the experiences.

Universities have an important role in training the next generation of development workers, and scientists, who are well grounded in the realities that farmers face, and are able to support agribusiness innovations in a sustainable and responsive manner. Such innovations will be critical in overcoming emerging challenges such as climate change, transboundary animal as well as zoonotic diseases, globalization and related challenges, rural urban migration and the knowledge economy, among others. The Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) agreed to by African Leaders in 2003 sets a target for a 6% annual increase in agricultural output at national level through development and implementation of evidence based strategies. The Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024 (STISA) calls for the integration of science as an underpinning for development initiatives, to support Africa's competitiveness in today's knowledge

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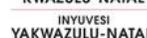
economy. Recent agreement of the Sustainable Development Goals at the global level, further underscore the importance of harnessing available capacity to respond to current challenges and shortcomings of initiatives that made up the Millennium Development Goals.

Community engagement initiatives under RUFORUM

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) was founded in 2004 by African Vice Chancellors to etch out a clear role and place for universities in supporting rural development. RUFORUM envisions 'a vibrant agricultural sector linked to African universities that can produce high-performing graduates and high-quality research, responsive to the demands of Africa's farmers for innovations, and able to generate sustainable livelihoods and national economic development'. RUFORUM has over the years focused on identifying models of community transformation that could be adapted to Africa's diverse contexts and implemented by university members to contribute to the attainment of Africa vision, Agenda 2063 and the Global Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030).

The RUFORUM Graduate Research Grants Program within its Competitive Grants Systems emphasizes linking faculty and students with rural communities, promoting inter-disciplinary research and encouraging multi-agency research teams to create impact across the region. The CGS gives universities opportunities to encourage participatory research by faculty and students working in partnerships with the farmers and other agencies involved in research and development. On the other hand the Community Action Research Programme (CARP) encourage universities to develop and invest in more comprehensive and sustained action research into a particular geographical area or in a selected commodity along the full value chain. RUFORUM is also piloting a Student Community Attachment Programme, where students, both undergraduates and postgraduate, are attached to rural communities to foster rural transformation by strengthening community entrepreneurs and value chains. The aim is also to train a pool of young graduates with strong values of rural attachment, giving back to society and championing rural transformations. RUFORUM's approach is to pilot specific programs,

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which can be used for learning, and to support policy advocacy at regional and continental level, strengthen the sharing of best practice and support scaling to member universities and beyond.

RUFORUM has worked closely with EARTH University (Costa Rica), Wageningen University and Research Centre (Netherlands), Makerere University, Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) in Malawi, and University of Eldoret (Kenya) and others to strengthen its Community Action Research Program (CARP) model by integrating approaches for enhancing experiential learning and entrepreneurship programs within university training programs. Although While RUFORUM has piloted these models, there is strong recognition that there are other initiatives and programs globally that could potentially benefit African Universities in transformation towards greater community engagement. Experiences include Songhai Center in Benin and Ashesi University in Ghana, among others, which have all demonstrated innovativeness within specific contexts. Experiences from a wider range of partners will greatly benefit African universities and the higher education sector in general.

RUFORUM recognizes the importance of linking its initiatives with a greater understanding of both national level policy direction, but also towards the direction for development assistance from strategic partners that have had great involvement with Africa in the past and will most likely continue to do so in the future such as from Europe, America and Asia.

Objectives of the session

The overall aim of the session is to review lessons on approaches to strengthening university engagement with communities so as to identify models that could be shared and mainstreamed at African universities, with adaptation to fit local context.

Approach and Methodology

The session will be held on Thursday 20 October, 2016 at the Century City Conference Center in Cape Town, South Africa. It will start with a key note paper by Dr David Bergvinson, the Director General of ICRISAT on Digital agriculture and reaching smallholder farmers. This will be followed by a Panel discussion on Linking Universities to Communities. The Panel will

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involve speakers from Songhai Center in Benin, EARTH University in Costa Rica, Witwatersrand University in South Africa, a RUFORUM alumni working in development from Farm Radio in Malawi, and a farmer from the Popular Women's Knowledge Initiative (P'KWI) in Uganda. Subsequently there will be parallel sessions on the topic such as one led by University of Venda on Strengthening university-community engagement and innovation platforms, the FARMNET Stakeholder workshop on Facilitated dialogue to inform the development of enhanced forms of smallholder market network structures and InnovATE (USAID Feed the Future programme) one on Positive youth development and experiential learning in university outreach.

Expected outputs

The following are the expected outputs from the Session:

1. Review of current research and development underway to strengthen university participation in improving food and nutrition security of communities in Africa
2. Sharing of best practices, models and experiences on strengthening university engagement with communities for impact
3. Recommendations for university transformations to improve support to rural communities in Africa

Venue and Participants

Venue: Century City Conference Centre, Hall C

Date & Time: Thursday 20th October 2016 from 1115-1730

Side Event Organizers and Contact

Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM)

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