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RUFORUM's Journey: Galvanizing Capacities in African Universities to support Rural Transformation in Africa

Africa has had a mixed growth patterns and so has its growth trajectory in education. In the early post-independence period, education played a key role in economic growth and stability of African economies. In the 1950-1960s, several African economies were better performing compared to the Asian tigers. Political and other development glitches set-in that derailed the continent's progress and similarly affected various facets on education including higher education's institutional capacity to respond to development priorities and needs at country and regional level. The

political and development glitches affected the build-up of relevant critical capacities at universities in the region; in particular in countries that were in the conflict and post-conflict recovery phase; this ultimately has continued to punctuate the continent's institutional capacities and region's higher education growth.

For some time, the Rockefeller Foundation had been active in supporting development interventions across sub-Saharan Africa. Ten Universities in five countries (Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Uganda and Zimbabwe) approached the Rockefeller Foundation with the need to basically undertake a reconstruction of its staff capacities as mechanism to stabilize higher education and produce graduates that are in better position to respond to development priorities at community level. This led to the founding of the Forum for Agricultural Resource Husbandry (FORUM) programme (1992-2003) that supported the training of up to 250 master's graduates from the five countries. These graduates became key stabilisers to universities teaching capacities, produced technologies, innovations and management practices that formed a key component of the university-technology transfer at the time. Further, these masters' fellows formed the fulcrum for rebuilding the National Agricultural Research Systems and today, these fellows are senior managers, administrators, programme leaders and professors in universities, research institutes and National Programmes.

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By 2003, the FORUM programme had come to a close. However, the Vice Chancellors of the 10 participating universities in FORUM had seen the immense contribution of the programme. In particular the improvement in the quality of training at the Master of Science (M.Sc.) level, the vibrancy in research created by the competitive grants programme and strengthened institutional capacity and networking arrangements; the Vice Chancellors were convinced that it was not time to close the programme despite the close of the funding arrangements from the Rockefeller Foundation. This action of the Vic Chancellors, I liken it to a team of people that had connected to the saying that *“Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.”* From the decision of the Vice Chancellors, the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) was born. At its birth, RUFORUM was then motivated and responding to the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), a continental agenda agreed upon by African Heads of state for reducing poverty, and food and nutrition insecurity in the continent.

From 2004-2014, RUFORUM mainly concentrated its effort in Eastern and Southern Africa. In 2008 and 2009, we launched the Regional Training Programmes at Masters and PhD level taking into consideration the comparative advantage and the history of each university in training students across the region. This led to the notion of an early centres of leadership in particular fields. For example; Makerere University hosted (and stills hosts) the Masters in Plant Breeding and Seed Systems and PhD in Plant Breeding and Bio-Technology, University of Nairobi hosts the PhD in Dryland Resources Management, and the PhD in Agricultural Economics and PhD in Fisheries and Aquaculture are hosted by Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (Malawi). At this time, we had many skeptics that did not believe that Africa was ready to offer taught doctoral training programmes, we however later proved them wrong as these programmes soon delivered highly qualified and competent graduates at a relatively lower cost compared to sending them to outside Africa for training. In 2014, the African Union Commission recognised the effort and progress made by RUFORUM in the field of higher agricultural education and this led to a new phase of institutional growth dynamics. The recognition led to an official Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between African Union Commission and RUFORUM which was endorsed in 2014. This MoU tasked RUFORUM to play a larger continental role including a task to expand its operations to the whole continent. Consequently, expansion to Central, North and West Africa commenced in 2014 and has seen RUFORUM’s growth in membership as well as an expansion in programme areas. Today, RUFORUM has a membership of 121 universities from 38 African countries covering all the five African Union regions in the continent.

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During the last 15 years of RUFORUM's operations, one can easily be drawn to the issue of counting numbers of graduates that have gone through the RUFORUM programmes. Rightly so, as RUFORUM we have now supported the training of 1,888 masters fellows and 506 PhD fellows in the last 15 years. The value however is not in the number that has been trained but the contribution that these graduates are making in the continent. I share the exponential effect of training one graduate as an example and what the outcome of such training means. Dr. Robert Kawuki was a RUFORUM beneficiary student in plant breeding whose masters research together with his supervisor Prof. Phinehas Tukamuhabwa of Makerere University led to the release of several soya bean varieties. The underlying principle has been the collaborative network and engagement that this team of young and senior scientists developed and has been a game changer to the soya bean production in Uganda and the region. There are over 4.5 million smallholder beneficiaries depending on soya bean production in Uganda. This young graduate (Dr. Kawuki) has now expanded these skills to cassava breeding that is a key staple for more than 20 million people in Uganda. Materials from their breeding programmes at the Centre of Excellence in Cassava Breeding in Uganda are also available to other breeders across Eastern, Central, Southern, and west Africa. With rising climate variability and change and cassava being drought tolerant, it will continue to play a key role in food and nutrition security in the region. There are many of these kind of examples to illustrate how RUFORUM's impact is contributing to rural development in the continent.

In daring to dream, RUFORUM had to invariably look at its strategic direction. Through wide-ranging consultations including with policy makers and other key stakeholders, RUFORUM developed its Vision 2030 "The African Universities' Agenda for Agricultural Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (AHESTI)". This new strategy, to be operated through Flagship programmes, brings in focus key issues including youth employability, skills development and entrepreneurship, and the need to broaden education value chain by fostering closer interface between the universities and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions. There is also emphasis on creation of Regional Anchor Universities for strengthening agricultural transformation in the continent, development of ST&I, increasing scientific research output through greater support for graduate training in Africa and increasing the pool of women scientists in the continent. These key issues will be the core thrusts of RUFORUM in the next 12 years and will require strong partnerships among universities and with other key actors from within and outside Africa.

The AHESTI agenda recognises the underlying fact that across the RUFORUM member universities is a collective workforce of some 15,000 faculty academics and over 250,000 students at undergraduate and graduate levels that can be strategically deployed to lead development imperatives at community and national level. Through one of the Flagship

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programmes “Transforming African Agricultural Universities to meaningfully contribute to Africa's growth and development (TAGDev)” under the Vision 2030, we are demonstrating the collective power that universities can take in facilitating rural transformation. In a period of three months at Gulu University (Uganda) and Egerton University (Kenya), 302 students participated in community field attachment serving as extension agents. They engaged with 5,500 smallholder farmers providing a total of 38,660 working days equivalent and working with 58 institutions in agricultural information and technology transfer. Further, some 16 community action research programmes in Benin, Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe are benefiting over 150,000 people within a period of two years. These programmes are supporting technologies, innovations and management practices in various agricultural value chains including: baobab, pineapple, wool, safflower, cassava, potatoes, vegetables, rice, and apiary, among others. As articulated in the Vision 2030, the focus is to get African universities to play a transformative role; it is not just doing science for the sake of science but responding to the priority needs of the communities with relevant and applicable technologies and innovations.

In a globalized world of today, the daring to dream in the Vision 2030, also seeks to consolidate the value of Africans who value, respect and are committed to Africa's development. Through this, the intra-Africa academic mobility for staff and students are key components for realising greater integration and cross-regional appreciation of Africa's heritage by graduate students and academic staff. These graduates are not only those that simply know and appreciate the continent but have the capacity to valorize the opportunities in the continent. Accordingly, raising entrepreneurial graduates has continued to be an additional focus of immense importance. We now have over 380 students undergoing entrepreneurship training, mentorship and incubation in the agribusiness incubation hubs established. These students are now running up to 90 business in and outside of the universities; Busitema University, Gulu University, Bishop Stuart University, and Uganda Christian University in Uganda, Abomey Calavi University (Benin), Catholic University of Bukavu (DR. Congo), University of Cape Coast (Ghana), and Egerton University (Kenya). Through these youth led social enterprises, the students are creating a number of jobs and supporting enterprise and social innovation advancement. The RUFORUM journey is thus one of the continent that is focused on the development engine for Africa, agriculture, and how agricultural potential can be harnessed by use of science, technology and innovation. The Annual General Meeting of RUFORUM Network Universities, to be held 2-6 December 2019 at Cape Coast, Ghana, will provide a great opportunity to reflect on the needed actions to enhance delivery of AHESI and Africa's universities role in contributing to attainment of Agenda 2063- *Africa We Want*.

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About the Author

Prof. Adipala Ekwamu, a Crop Scientist by training, is the Executive Secretary of the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM, see www.ruforum.org), a network of 121 universities in 38 African countries. He taught at Makerere from 1980 to 2003, and during his tenure at Makerere University he founded the MUARIK Journal for publishing research findings from the University. In 1993, he founded the African Crop Science Society, which has remained one of the most vibrant professional societies in the continent up to date. He also founded the African Crop Science Journal in 1993 which is today a leading Journal in Africa. In 2014, he founded the African Journal of Rural Development (see www.afjrd.org), an online open access journal to enable researchers and development actors share their research and practice experiences on rural development issues in Africa. He is a strong advocate for human capital development and champion for Higher Education in Africa.