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Role of national universities in Africa's socio-economic transformation: Towards greater accountability, efficiency and effectiveness

Reflecting on the lessons learned and what has been achieved after more than 25 years working in international development promoting science and innovation, there is need to consider what could have been done differently. Since the 1970's, scholars, governments, the business community and civil society have been examining the role of national universities in social and economic development, and demanding: greater accountability, efficiency and effectiveness. The expectation has been that public and private investments in higher education should generate broad economic growth, social progress and individual success. Infrastructure and services should have improved, and enterprises and citizens should be better off. While there has been

notable progress as national universities have expanded and their roles in the social and economic transformation of several developing countries have been recognised e.g. Brazil, China, Singapore, there remains a lingering doubt and recurring questions, "Are universities relevant? Are they doing enough? Where are the success stories?"

Having collaborated with RUFORUM over the past 15 years, it can be affirmed that this African university network has worked towards achieving greater accountability, efficiency and effectiveness and collectively, its members have responded to and are addressing societal challenges with some measure of success. This is confirmed by: the growth in the number of member universities (from 10 – 121), its continental spread (from East to West, and South to North) and its international partnerships (with Canada, China, Korea, Latin America, the EU and US); the new and innovative research and education programmes that have been introduced (e.g. the joint Regional training programmes in Agricultural and Rural Innovations, Agricultural Information and Communication Management, Dryland and Climate Changes studies); the numbers of young professionals and faculty members who have been trained and the communities who have benefitted through the collaborative research activities as well as the engagement with policymakers and key decision-makers. But is this enough?

The reality is that Africa is still facing numerous challenges including: (i) high poverty and unemployment, especially among the youth population which will double to over 830 million by

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2050 (most work in the informal economy and 67% live in poverty); (ii) 257 million Africans are undernourished; (iii) underperforming agricultural and other economic sectors; (iv) high reliance on food imports, \$35 billion net annually, and; (v) low investments in research and development (R&D), only 1.1% of global R&D investments. While attending a science advisory meeting in October 2019, an article in one of the leading Kenyan newspapers on farmers applying the wrong fertiliser for years, negatively impacting on soils, yields and incomes, raised alarm bells. Harvests were projected to be poor. And yet the solutions were known to all; academia, researchers, government, farmers, input suppliers and financiers. In November 2019, another story circulated to partners on a research and innovation platform, triggered more alarm bells. Kenyans were consuming aflatoxin contaminated maize with detrimental impact on human health. The aflatoxin problem in Africa is well known, researched and widely published in peer-reviewed journals. These disconnects between the scientific community and the realities confronting governments and citizens, have concerned me for years and should continue to concern us all. “Where are we failing and why? What is our moral, ethical and social responsibility in providing solutions to these critical issues? Should the merit system for academic progress be reassessed?” These are questions that the RUFORUM community has been grappling with for years.

A higher rate of investment as well as greater commitment to ethical and social responsibility is needed if advancements are to be made to achieve the “Africa We Want” by 2063, *“An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena”*. This requires stronger multi-level national, regional and international public-private partnerships; increased intensity in capacity development; more targeted investments in science, research education, and entrepreneurship, and an enabling and inclusive policy and institutional framework comprising governments, the private sector, the knowledge institutes and civil society to trigger as well as sustain continuous social, organisational and technological innovation. The RUFORUM network has adopted these approaches. What then needs to be done differently? What should be prioritised and what novel strategies should be employed or redeployed? What additional public and private investments are needed to achieve the greatest impact in the shortest possible timeframe? The focus must be on job and wealth creation, food and nutrition security, peace and security for all including youth and women and not solely on increasing the numbers of graduates and peer-reviewed publications.

Fragmentation of effort is not an option; the role of RUFORUM in mobilising its member universities and being committed to finding solutions through quality enhancement in research and education and maintaining ethical standards, remains extremely relevant.

Key Messages: Be bold and learn from African and Global Best Practice!

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For greater accountability, effectiveness and efficiency: RUFORUM must not be afraid to do things differently. Be bold! Be creative! Through ongoing collaboration with senior leaders of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) and European universities and research organisations, RUFORUM's leaders have reflected on the role that Embrapa (Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation), has played in transforming the agri-food system in Brazil and how Cuba, despite its political isolation and international sanctions, has developed its research and innovation system and made scientific breakthroughs in medicine and agriculture. Collectively, African universities have monitored China's evolution, its increasing contribution to science and innovation and the role its universities has played in improving the livelihoods of farmers and rural communities. RUFORUM has partnered with the Wageningen University and Research (WUR) as well as other EU and North and Latin American institutions in joint research and teaching projects and built on good practices of African universities e.g. Kenyatta and Stellenbosch Universities. Lessons have been learned and used strategically to grow the network and been showcased at RUFORUM meetings.

Last year, while participating in the WUR 2018 centenary celebrations which featured the university's contribution to national and international development, I wondered when an African university, will host its centenary celebrations and showcase its contribution to national and continental socio-economic transformation. WUR is ranked # 1 in the Netherlands and #1 among agricultural universities worldwide according to the National Taiwan University ranking. After World War 2, farmers were struggling, people were starving, and WUR, a small university then, was able to craft a future and make a difference. WUR continues to push the boundaries and develop new capabilities to respond to national and global, economic, environmental and social challenges.

From these and other experiences, over the years, there are some guiding principles that I would like to share with RUFORUM going forward: (i) Be single minded in purpose and remain committed to engaging with government, civil society and the private sector; (ii) Be tactical and strategic in positioning universities to access and use public and private investments wisely, and continuously communicate and demonstrate impact on society and industries; (iii) Promote continuous innovation, that is not only premised on introducing 'new' courses and 'smart' technologies but on systemic and systematic changes that yield results that have impact on the ground; (iv) Demonstrate a willingness to learn from mistakes as well as successes and use the lessons to create new opportunities for research, education, teaching and outreach to the benefit of national, regional and international students and faculty in member universities as well as the societies they serve.

For greater accountability, effectiveness and efficiency: RUFORUM and its universities must be seen as learning laboratories involved in shaping development and social progress. They must be recognised and valued by governments, private sector, and civil society as partners who are committed to ensuring adequate returns on investments and the progress of nations. Rethinking the way success is measured and introducing changes to the merit and reward systems are imperatives for sustainability. RUFORUM must build on quality management systems which are yielding results

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but be prepared to accelerate changes in programmes. The magnitude of the societal challenges needs swifter consideration. African universities are ready to break out of the mould and be global leaders in shaping Africa's 2063 socio-economic transformation. African societies including, women and youth have expectations that this must happen before 2063. In the next few years, national newspapers and scientific journals should be publishing and promoting the success stories widely and RUFORUM's 15th AGM will showcase the continued relevance of African universities and their impact on economic and societal transformation.

This is our second issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM AGM 2019 Digests. You can get more details about the meeting at <http://www.ruforum.org/AGM2019/> and more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also join us online using Social Media for real time updates. Our Official hashtag is #AGMGhana2019.

About the Author:

Dr. Judith Ann Francis is Senior Programme Coordinator, Science and Technology Policy at the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA), The Netherlands. She presently leads the multi-country CTA-IFAD co-funded Innov4AgPacific Project. Judith also wears several hats including Chair, of the Tropical Agricultural Platform (TAP), member of the International Advisory Panel of the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) and the BecA-ILRI Hub and Executive Secretary of the European Forum for Agricultural Research for Development. Since joining CTA in 2003, Judith has championed the innovation systems approach, increasing investments in science, technology and innovation (STI), building capacity of young professionals and women in science, and strengthening inter-and intra-regional as well as EU-ACP science, technology and innovation cooperation for agricultural and rural development (ARD) in the 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States. She has also authored several publications. Prior to joining CTA in 2003, Judith worked with the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), and the Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI). She has also lectured at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

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