



The Seventh African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Triennial Conference 2021

Community Action Research Programmes Learning and Sustainability Dialogue

Principal Investigators Meeting Report

Venue: Palais des Congres, Date: 6th -7th December, Cotonou, Benin

Background

Societies have increasingly come out strong demanding for the relevance of universities in contributing to the improvement of economic and social living conditions of communities. This increased demand for the relevance of universities is now redefining how universities approach their space in national and regional discourse. Increasingly, universities are paying attention to the third role of outreach with a strong articulation for engagement such universities are seen as engaged institutions connecting with communities to address their everyday challenges and development aspiration.

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building (RUFORUM) has been focused on strengthening engaged universities as part of catalysing the role of universities in contributing to rural development. Over the years, RUFORUM has done this through a unique sub-granting mechanism of the Community Action Research Programs (CARPs). The CARPs are designed as innovation platforms that represent spaces for learning and change, bringing diverse actors together to co-design, co-innovate, co-produce and co-implement innovations and solutions responsive to challenges faced by the actors in the agricultural system. Within the context of RUFORUM, the CARPs are implemented along commodity value chains with the aim enhancing production and productivity, value addition and commercialisation.

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RUFORUM initiated the CARPs in 2009 as a mechanism for taking to scale the several pilot innovations generated from the Graduate Research Grants (GRGs). The GRGs had generated several technologies, innovations and management practices but were too scattered at pilot level and not significantly engaging communities. It was time to reduce researching on the community to researching with the community and playing an active role in transforming agricultural practice among the smallholder farmers in Africa. But, this required a platform for universities to play this role and this platform was provided by the CARPs.

The initial CARPs; fish (Malawi), Cassava (Uganda), Dairy (Tanzania), and Wheat (Ethiopia) were implemented with funding support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The success realised from these initial CARP projects laid the foundation for an expanded approach to utilisation of the CARPs in the RUFORUM programming as 'scaling laboratories'. With the support from the Mastercard Foundation through the Transforming African Agricultural Universities to meaningfully contribute to Africa's growth and development (TAGDev) program, RUFORUM has extended this model to more countries and value chains. These include: two Cassava projects (Kenya) two Potato projects (Kenya and Kenya), Baobab (Benin), Pineapple (Ghana), Safflower (Botswana), Sheep and wool (South Africa), Rice (Uganda), Piggery (Uganda), cereals, legumes and water harvesting (Zimbabwe), encroacher bushes (Namibia), famine crops (Sudan), vegetables (Sudan), apiary (Sudan) and natural resources management (Sudan). These CARPs seek to:

- i) Support collaborative action research led by universities with participation of graduate students that addresses critical agricultural production and marketing constraints facing smallholder farmers in Africa;
- ii) Provide opportunity for creation of multi-stakeholder 'platforms' that support value chain development for the benefit of small-holder farmers and to enhance the impact of university activities;
- iii) Provide action research platforms and opportunities for greater student engagement and experiential learning in supporting smallholder farm development through agribusiness and ensure that lessons are used to facilitate university reflection and learning;

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- iv) Support strengthening of TVET institutions through engagement and joint action between universities and TVET institutions to enhance the impact of knowledge on small-holder farms;

Purpose of the dialogue

As the international development community strives to ensure that interventions go beyond fragmented and one-off projects to scaling of successful innovations and pilots for maximising impact at scale, the CARPs provide a unique and illustrative platform to serve as 'scaling laboratories'. The CARPs as 'scaling laboratories' provide for a platform for co-creation with a practical orientation in demonstration and learning points to support going beyond a successful pilot. Through this, sustainability of the interventions and development outcomes could be secured. Therefore, the purpose of this dialogue was:

1. Showcase some of the on-going work in the Community Action Research Programme;
2. Building capacity of the CARP+ Principal Investigators on critical thinking and business incubation with their projects;
3. Share experiences, lesson and challenges in community action research and collaboration; and
4. Collaboratively discuss on the sustainability of CARP initiatives into the future

Meeting Proceedings

1. Purpose of CARPs

The CARPs are designed as university innovation platforms that bring diverse actors together to build capacity and co-design, co-innovate, co-produce and co-implement innovations and solutions responsive to challenges in rural areas. These CARPs are implemented along commodity value chains to enhance productivity, food security, value addition and commercialisation. To ensure that interventions go beyond fragmented the CARPs provide a unique and illustrative platform to serve as 'scaling laboratories' that combine action research with students involved in practical implementation. They are university facilitated platforms that engage in multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral, and multi-

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agency initiatives that put smallholder farmers and micro-enterprises at the centre. They are interdisciplinary and help to more closely link universities to their societies.

This is a very different approach than that normally employed by university researchers and takes the senior scientists and students outside their comfort zones. Initially it is difficult for them to accept all the additional time and effort required to facilitate engagement and broker relationships. RUFORUM has been closely engaged with these projects to support them to transform their approach and to see the advantages of this more inclusive research and implementation platform.

The sessions held at the Triennial Higher Education Conference in Benin, December 2021, provided an opportunity to engage with the project leaders, discuss their progress and challenges and give them support in charting their way forward. A number of outside experts shared information on enterprise development, the core elements to put in place to encourage sustainability and the new trends and possibilities for supporting rural transformation. The group also discussed their involvement in producing a book documenting the CARP experiences with Megan Lindow who will author the story volume, while they will contribute chapters to the science volume.

2. Overall Impression on the academic status of the CARPs

The focus of the meeting was on the broader issues of impact, multiplier effects, maintaining relationships, and the sustainability of their projects. The participants have all undertaken to provide the current status of their academic progress in tables and that analysis will form part of the final report. They were asked to focus their presentations on the impacts and lessons arising from implementing their projects.

On the whole, although all had been affected and delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown and other disruptions, they are all back on track academically. The CARPs in Uganda, Kenya, and Benin, which were funded earlier, had progressed well and are at the stage of finding ways to strengthen impacts and future engagement. From the information so far presented, some (not all) of the CARPs in Sudan, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia have one, or two, students who might be considerably delayed because a different student had to be recruited or other reason. But all assured the meeting that they will still be able to achieve their targets within the budget, although they may have to apply for no-cost extensions. All the CARPs indicated that they had produced

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scientific papers and created various popular media channels to communicate their results to the communities.

Overall Impression of the impact of the CARPs on transforming the universities' approach to research and potential role as a fulcrum for catalysing change in local communities

It was most gratifying that participants clearly articulated how excited they were to have been engaged in this approach. The CARPs that had almost completed were most enthusiastic in their presentations of what they had achieved and how these platforms had already triggered meaningful changes. The meeting in Benin further energised all and even the most sceptical scientists now really understand the benefits that came from these platforms: to their own personal careers, those of the students, to the universities as they broaden and deepen their partnerships, and most especially to see that what they are doing, can significantly improve the lives of poor rural farmers. They were excited that they are able to play a role in transforming the lives of the farmers and also to provide opportunities to students and to be better linked with the private sector, local government and even be in a position to influence policy. All three Kenyan CARPs have been directly engaged in new national policy initiatives. The pig and rice CARPs in Uganda have changed local policies and have resulted in new, innovative businesses. The baobab CARP has raised nutrition levels and assisting in supporting biodiversity and reducing negative impacts on naturally occurring trees. The pineapple CARP in Ghana has influenced the extension services and showcased the potential for mobile phones and drones to support small-scale farmers improve production. The CARPs in Sudan and Southern Africa are starting to show their potential for broader impact. It was clear that the CARP platforms are building up relationships of the universities with both private sector and government agencies. Furthermore these platforms are impacting communities not only with their innovations but also by facilitating closer links with services and markets.

3. Overall Impression of the impact on the communities

All the CARPs have already shown strong evidence of improving the lives of the communities they work with. A glimpse of some of the impacts can be seen in the films which have just been produced showing just a few of the positive impacts on the Egerton [potato](#) and [cassava](#) CARPs and on the Gulu [pig](#) and [rice](#) CARPs and the [baobab](#) CARP in Benin. The gains are extensive and even in the newer CARPs, rural livelihoods and the quality of the lives of smallholder farmers have been lifted as can be seen in the film on the [wool](#) CARP. The presentations at the meeting in Benin gave information on the

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benefits already created in Ghana, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Botswana. An example was of the Deputy President of Botswana encouraging one women's group to contact the university and the small farmers already selling safflower seed and medicinal teas, with demand outstripping supply.

4. Contribution to graduate relevance and potential for employment

There was evidence presented that in the advanced CARPs most of the students were all gainfully employed – some in other countries with international agencies and there were quite a few who have started businesses related to their CARP innovations. There is also evidence that other students have picked up innovations from the colleagues and taken them back to their home countries (e.g. a TAGDev student, not linked to a CARP, who has started a pig business in Cameroon using some of the innovations trialled in the Gulu pig CARP). The CARP gives the students real insight into the challenges of rural communities and a chance to develop or adapt technologies to meet them. It gives them a chance to hone their communication skills with farmers and with senior government officials or business people. It requires them to be creative and increases their confidence and helps them develop the skills they need to be effective change agents.

5. Overall Impression of the impact of working with Technical and Vocational Agricultural Colleges

This has been a remarkable success. Both the TVET members present and the Principal Investigators from the universities gave evidence of much stronger links as a result of the CARPs. In most cases there were no links before and now they are working together to extend information to the farmers, or to produce and sell seed, or to supply equipment and maintenance to the CARP projects. The TVET students are sometimes directly supported through the projects and they often work alongside the university students on particular aspects. In several cases the TVET colleges articulated how they had gained visibility and increased their student numbers and client base. They all agreed that the relationship is expected to be sustained after the project and several are already now cooperating with other university departments.

6. Building relationships with other stakeholders in agricultural research and rural development

The presentations given identified a wide range of areas where the CARP platforms had strengthened existing relationships and built new ones. These were with research agencies

(almost all), government, NGO and private sector extension/information systems (e.g. pineapple and sesame/water harvesting), large private sector processing and marketing systems (e.g. Namibia meat processors where the contact even travelled to the conference in Benin), established micro-enterprise training and support systems, and strengthened the role of their universities in providing evidence and support to policy-makers.

7. Other benefits

The other benefits associated with the implementation of the CARPs included a range of unintended benefits where the farmers, or the TVETs, or the universities have gained other unrelated benefits because of the establishment of the platforms e.g. the improved social cohesion arising out of farmers working together on the projects, or linking of the university more closely with international agencies (e.g. Sudan with the Institute of Desertification Studies, Baraka TVET, Kenya with the International Potato Centre). By supporting TVET enrolment of students from very remote project farmers in Zimbabwe, the participants highlighted benefits from other skills and technologies brought home, creating an even stronger relationship between farmers and university. The demands of the CARP would often require the PI to find alternative ways to achieve their objectives, so building their own ability to adapt and find solutions. Sometimes these would include learning from each other (e.g. Ghana learning from Kenya on pineapple multiplication when tissue culture too expensive).

The CARPs are directly contributing to a much greater appreciation for the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to address issues faced by the farmers – and also when developing Applications and other 4IR technologies. In various ways the projects identified the challenges but also the significant benefits of working in multi-disciplinary teams. All the CARP projects have raised the visibility of their institutions and of the Principal Investigators and enhanced their own, and their student, career paths. They are also making a significant contribution to global knowledge by working in remote areas on relatively under-researched commodities that are important to local livelihoods and nutrition.

8. Sustainability of the CARPs

The sustainability of these CARPs does need investment of time and the continued strengthening of relationships. It was rewarding to hear some of the initiatives already underway that will contribute to sustaining individual innovations and enterprises

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established. It was even more rewarding to hear of efforts to institutionalise and strengthen the relationships established through the platform (e.g. developing a Root Crop Centre of Excellence at Egerton by working with the government agencies and other stakeholders involved in the CARPs). The issue of sustainability was discussed in some depth with ideas shared on the key elements to try to put in place to ensure that the innovations and platforms are sustained in the communities and at the university. There was also some discussion of the potential for developing or supporting larger enterprises and it was recognised that attention will need to be given to patents and also to how to structure these if they are to be closely linked to the universities or the TVET colleges. The participants were exposed to some examples of how the early CARP projects have evolved showing that they are not expected to necessarily retain the same profile. The CARP projects are catalysts and should be adaptable to changing circumstances.

9. Conclusion

This two day dialogue provided CARP PIs with opportunity to discuss some of their challenges and share how these had been overcome, they gained from ideas on how to institutionalise and help to sustain the activities triggered by the CARPs and all participants felt that they had gained from traveling to Benin, despite the challenges of travel during Covid-19. They are clearly excited by what they are achieving and are keen to be able to take the CARPs forward and to continue the momentum.

Some of the Principal Investigators at the Meeting

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