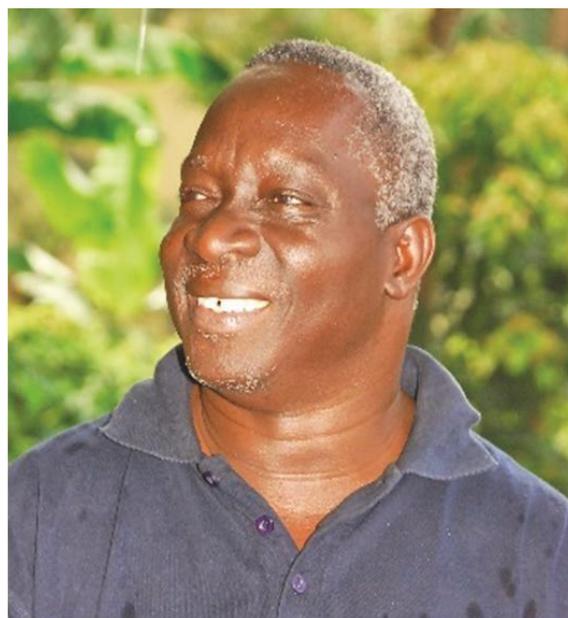




The RUFORUM Triennial Conference: Perspectives for the Present and Future Convenings



Prologue: Africa and the global economy both face head winds of post covid-19 pandemic recovery, that has been tapered by increasing resurgence the disease and prevalence of new variants of the pathogen SARS-Cov-2: Alpha (B.1.1.7 and descendent lineages), Beta (B.1.351 and descendent lineages), Gamma (P.1 and descendent lineages), Epsilon (B.1.427 and B.1.429), Eta (B.1.525), Iota (B.1.526), Kappa (B.1.617.1), 1.617.3, Mu (B.1.621, B.1.621.1) and Zeta (P.2)¹.



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Currently the delta strain first reported in India is increasingly the most-wide spread and considered Variant of Concern (VOC) due to its high transmissibility, more severe disease (e.g., increased hospitalizations or deaths), significant reduction in neutralization by antibodies generated during previous infection or vaccination, reduced effectiveness of treatments or vaccines, or diagnostic detection failures among others. This present threat by COVID-19 (SARS-Cov-2) currently poses the single most driver of negative economic growth globally. Africa economy is reported to have shrunk by 2.1 percent in 2020, leading to the continent's first recession in half a century. The African Development Bank estimates that nearly 39 million Africans could fall into extreme poverty in 2021². Whereas 2021 has seen a resurgence of the economies globally and in Africa, growth is varied with the continent, with East Africa's economic growth expected to recover to an average of 4.1% in 2021, up from 0.4% in 2020, projected to hit 4.9% according to the African Development Bank.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/variant-info.html> sourced 24th November 2021.

² <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/african-economic-outlook-2021>



The education sector has not been spared either with most teaching and learning institutions closed for many months since arrival of the SARS-COV 2 on the shores of Africa. Whereas the impacts of the pandemic on many economies that are now either partially, or now fully open, the implications for teaching and learning is a mix bag of opportunities and challenges. Among others, the pandemic has exposed the digital divide among countries and within countries as the single most significant barrier to access to equal opportunity to modern teaching and learning³. The study by E-learning further notes among others, three critical issues that will affect education systems in Africa: (a) National curriculums need to be adapted for more effective distance learning and inclusion; (b) the economic lockdown has unlocked new opportunities for education systems- the way forward for African University; and (c) Online teaching and learning will lead to more widespread use of technology in education, but will be compounded by the digital gap especially the among the most marginalised and may lead to increased inequality.

The Seventh African Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Triennial Conference 2021, provides an opportunity to reflect on these issues as they will inform the restructure of our education programmes to be "fit for purpose." Throughout human economic evolution, the quality of human resources has played major roles, generating innovations, building management systems and standards to support economic growth⁴. In 2021, the United Nations (UN) held several convenings that culminating in a UN FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT in September. The SUMMIT aimed to among others, "launch new actions, solutions, and strategies to achieve healthier, more sustainable, and equitable food systems." This thrust by the UN emerges from the realization of concerted efforts to address challenges facing global systems of producing, processing and distributing food made more pronounced with new shock such as COVID-19 and other biophysical and economic shocks. As part of the UN FOOD SYSTEMS process, RUFORUM championed the role of Africa's higher education sector especially the University in generating policy and science solutions to that will underpin sustainable agri-food systems for the continent. The mobilized African University recognized their pivotal role in the continents' economic transformation especially in human resource development as well as science, innovation and technology generation for the present and future posterity. During this RUFORUM Triennial meeting, these two pillars of our development, i.e. (i) inclusive teaching and learning and (ii) sustainable agri-food systems, especially with the ever-present threat of COVID-19, given plasticity associated with its fast evolution and threat to international trade and movement will be discussed. Participants in-person and online will review and consider critical areas for building robust responses systems to these contemporary development challenges, this generation

³ https://www.elearning-africa.com/reports_surveys_COVID19.php

⁴ <https://elibrary.worldbank.org/doi/abs/10.1596/1813-9450-4122>



must address.

Africa's changing economic environment: A mixed bag of opportunities.

The past two years 2020-2021, have been the most challenging in recent years for the global economy, mostly driven by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its associated economic lockdown, that affected trade and movement of persons like never before in this generation. Indeed, global economy shrunk by 2.1%, the deepest recession, since the second world war according to the World Bank. Sub-Saharan Africa economy experiencing a recession for the first time in a quarter of a century smaller economies facing a contraction of up to 7%⁵. In the case of Africa, the most affected countries were those whose economies heavily relied on export of primary commodities. The economies of Eastern Africa, a region least dependent of primary commodities and has relatively greater economic diversification was the most resilient growing at 0.7%, while southern and West Africa shrunk by 1.5% and 7% in 2020⁶. Reports from UNCTAD show that East Africa economies benefited from their diversified economies that are less reliant on primary commodities. that in a way has buffered the region from region from the economic downturn associated with COVID-19 pandemic. On the whole, Africa experienced a less than projected shrinkage in the economy and remarkably projects an aggregate growth of (previously projected by the IMF to be 5.1%). Interestingly, the African Development Bank outlook for 2021 shows that economies less dependent on primary commodities will grow by nearly 5-fold from 0.9 % in 2020 to 4.1% in 2021.

A key lesson from the COVID-19 lockdown projected economic recovery, is that, highly dependent economies on primary resources and less diversified economies are not resilient to externalities and shocks such as COVID-19. To that extent therefore, extent economic diversification is an integral of most emerging economies⁷. Economic diversification inter-alia, requires investing in sectors and actions that increase productivity of the human and other productive resources, science and technology being a corner stone. The middle eastern countries for example are diversifying away from oil and gas, into services, a comparison being Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Ethiopia, whose service sectors are pivotal to their economies increasingly larger than the traditional resource sectors. Technology and the associated innovations that increase inclusion such as digital technologies will go a long way to enhancing productivity among and within different sector of the economy. The educations sector, digital technologies will improve real-time knowledge and unlock opportunity for co-learning. In the finance and trade, the informal tele-banking innovations can

⁵ Grace Dondwe, 2020. Assessing the impact of COVID -19 on Africa's Economic development. UNCTAD/ALDC/MISC?2020/3.

⁶ AfDB, 2021. Africa's Growth Performance and Outlook Amid The Covid-19 Pandemic. www.afdb.org.

⁷ Zainab Usman and David Landry, 2021. Economic Diversification in Africa: How and Why It Matters. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace

improve financial and market inclusion, reducing the number of those left behind by roping them into the monetized economy. The proportion of formally banked population in Mozambique increased from 23% in 2014 to 43% in 2019⁸, mainly due to the growth in informal banking, such as mobile banking, which increased from 10% in 2014 to 41% in 2019, compared to formal banking that only grew by 1% over the same period. This clearly shows the limited ability of traditional banking models to reach unbanked rural populations. Indeed, the robustness of Kenya and Rwanda, fast post covid recovering counties of east Africa (AfDB, 2021 outlook), the role of financial and market inclusion in the services sector cannot be underestimated among the leaders in fintech in East Africa. What this means for Africa is that, while a large proportion of its peoples are still engaged in agriculture, the sector must experience structural transformations that increase production and productivity as well as inlock opportunity to move millions out of poverty. Service, industry and trade sectors that increase inclusion by addressing diversity- Gender Youth and equity, if integrated with a growing agriculture sector have a high opportunity to significantly contribute diversification of African economy. The imperative as noted by recent past leaders in economic management and investment, Christine Lagarde- Director International Monetary Fund and Dr Njuguna Ndung'u- Governor Kenya Central Bank, best describe the urgency of the moment as Africa strives to move along a path of economic progress.

"Diversification is tremendously important for economic resilience and, while Africa has made socioeconomic progress in the last two decades, its economic diversification would have laid a more solid foundation for accelerated development. Economies that are not diversified experienced a decline in growth, accompanied by weak institutions, as well as stunted efforts at structural and economic transformation. Economies weakened by a lack of diversification are susceptible to global crises such as a pandemic⁹.

A journey to a diversified and resilient Africa- Africa University's role.

The African University must play a significant role in the continents' economic diversification having the highest concentration of full-time equivalents in most countries of qualified academics. The African University can do proactively engage in economic transformation processes by: (a) Building the human capital required to services various sectors of the diversifying economies, (b) Generating innovations that increase total factor productivity of various sectors of the economy, (c) Being the think-tank in their respective countries, by generating evidence to guide policy formation, (d) Supporting foresight planning and dialogues that position countries for better trade competitiveness among others. Given the benefit and need for steadfast national programming that delivers more diversified African economies that are less prone to economic shock and other externalities, the

⁸ FinScope consumer survey 2019 available online.

⁹ Zainab Usman and David Landry, 2021.

urgency and pressure on African Universities to significantly contribute to the structural transformation of national economies is all the more heightened. To this, rings the words of the Late Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Founding Father of the Nation of Tanzania, who speaking at an event at a national University asked the question, "if this university were to close today, would it be missed by the country, farmers and many other locals." During this week we shall hear some of the responses to this clarion-call as our academia, leaders, scientist and students engage in sharing, debate and co-learning events. It is our sincere hope that these triennial events, as envisioned during its seminal years, support your youth to re-enter agriculture by making it "cool" through technology... "Today our youth shun agriculture, because it is not "cool," I urge our universities to generate and embrace innovations that will attract our youth to agriculture by making it cool¹⁰. This clarion call nearly a decade ago is still relevant. RUFORUM has demonstrated, this using its diverse approaches implemented under its Transforming African Agricultural Universities to meaningfully contribute to Africa's growth and development (TAGDev¹¹) that is implementing innovative projects to recruit, train and re-engage young agri-preneurs in agriculture. Relevant projects include: Community Action Research Programme (CARP+), RUFORUM Enterprise Challenge Programme (RECAP), Technical Skills Development Programme (TESDEP) and Field Attachment Programme Awards (FAPA) supported. These projects have engaged hundreds of youths some of whom will be showcased and recognized during this triennial conference (Box 1).

- Sesameal-high fiber-based porridge flour
- Miami Butchery, processing and sale of pork and other meats
- Fruition Crushed, processing and value addition of pineapples into blended juices and service provision
- Pineapple marketing of fresh and processed pineapple
- Baobab green tea leaf powder
- Rice seed agribusiness
- Information systems for management of improved pineapple value-chains better smallholder livelihoods in central Ghana
- Potato value added products: flour, waffles, cookies and biscuits from potato composite flour
- Rice-related technologies: hand drawn rice planters, briquettes, and parboiled rice equipment

Box 1. Examples of technology and Spin-off businesses developed by RUFORUM TAGDEV supported initiatives. Source TAGDEV annual report RUFORUM. for details contact RUFORUM secretariate.

The RUFORUM fraternity is cognizant of the need to implement transformative teaching and learning and support that with policy reform, strategic leadership and investments. Using

¹⁰ Quote from a speech given during a RUFORUM Higher Education Week held in Cape Town, South Africa by Dr Nkozazana, Dhlamini Zuma, Former Chair African Union Quote

¹¹ TAGDev is supported through a grant by the Master Card Foundation. More details can be obtained from RUFORUM. The CARPS were initially Supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation but have since been supported by the MasterCard Foundation.



RUFORUM Triennial meeting, the Network leverages on opportunity to show case "institutional innovations," as well as engage at the highest levels of university management and public policy, in dialogues that inform the future of programming. RUFORUM's recent role in championing the role of African University during the UN FOOD summit, a process that involved several stakeholders was a new role and learning experience that drew policy makers, governments, investors, researchers, academia and students among others to discuss how to forge common and secure agri-food system. Such global roles and engagements while likely be the future as the world and indeed Africa learns from the need for convergence in actions form the COVID-19 pandemic. Future Triennials may therefore be held as a process rather than one event as is being piloted during the seventh convening. They will certainly still show case excellence in science and education, but will also anchor diverse dialogues to inform contemporary and future investment programming. This evolution will create diverse pathways for the network to influence the direction and speed of agricultural and indeed economic development of Africa and its partners.

Conclusions

At nearly two decades old, RUFORUM has transformed into a leading voice and collective investment arena for the African University. With a membership from 38 countries of Africa, The RUFORUM Network provides the scaffold for Africa's academia to co-learn with opportunity to move collectively. Thus, RUFORUM convenings are a force, whose collective impact, can greatly influence Africa's policy and investment arena. Looking into the future, and learning from the past two years under COIVID-19 induced economy lockdowns, online, digital and drawn out convenings will be the norm rather than the exception. Our students will remain the anchor of our showcases, while the ultimate beneficiaries, the farmers, policy, agribusiness, and managers will be present. The future triennials therefore hold a promise for greater and deeper engagement, co-learning and celebration of African Universities.

About the Author:

Prof. Adipala Ekwamu is the Executive Secretary of the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), a Network of 143 universities in 38 African countries. During this period, he has worked with the Network universities to train over 2000 Masters and more than 650 PhD students from across Africa, and made RUFORUM a leading voice for Higher Education in Africa. Prof. Adipala is a strong advocate for human capital development in Africa, as the fulcrum for Africa's development, especially in supporting rural transformation and generating innovations to spur economic development in the continent. He holds a PhD in Plant Pathology from the Ohio State University in the United States.

This is our second issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of the RUFORUM Seventh Africa Higher Education Week and RUFORUM Triennial Conference Digests. More information about the conference is available at <https://www.ruforum.org/Triennial2021/>. Join the Conversation on Social Media using our





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