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Implications of COVID on RUFORUM Secretariat Funding and Operations

According to UNESCO and the World Bank, approximately 8.5 million tertiary students had been disrupted by COVID-19 in sub Saharan Africa. This volume is part of the 220 million post-secondary students at the tertiary level sitting at home due to COVID-19 and the associated measures. The implication for tertiary and other institutions of learning has been a gravitation towards, online and distance learning, with varying degrees of success. The question arising, how are universities responding to this new reality? And how does a university member-based organisation such as RUFORUM situate in such an environment?

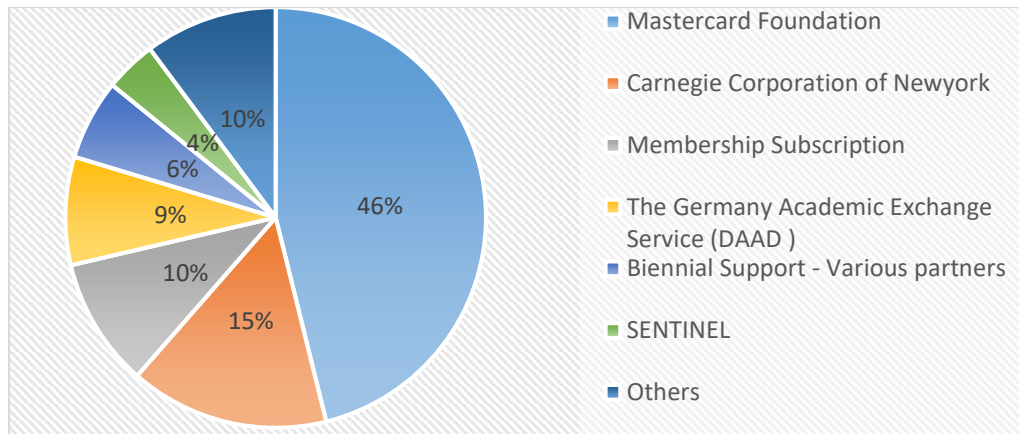
My argument today is anchored in the resource dependence theory. The basic tenet of the resource dependence theory is that external forces/resources affect how organisations behave in order to acquire resources. Organisations engage in transactions with other sectors and organisations for purposes of acquiring or maintaining resources. Thus, the transactions that RUFORUM makes to generate resources (financial/ human/ technical) will be shaped by three main factors

- 1- The environment within which we are operating –Post COVID-19, what challenges are should be addressed by the higher agricultural education and research sector? Where are they based (at member university level or at the small holder level?), who are the other actors in this challenge?
- 2- Where do the resources to address these challenges reside? Governments, donor agencies such as World Bank or philanthropy? What is the focus of these resource providers?
- 3- Past experience what are the sources of financing for RUFORUM? How can we use /adopt the existing resource and or restructure operations for the benefit of the Network? Within the current framework, the financing of RUFORUM operations is distributed across a few development partners. The question therefore is how will this configuration change post COVID-19?

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RUFORUM operations largely impact on two sectors – the higher education sector and the agricultural sector. Therefore, the starting point will be to structure programs around how COVID -19 is impacting on higher education in general and member universities in particular as they specifically relate to the agricultural sector.

At the sector level

- 1- RUFORUM should position itself as a solution provider. Utilising the network which can bring together several experts to address the impact on COVID at the sector level. Both higher education and Agriculture will benefit from such an initiative. Noting that Universities host multidisciplinary expertise. Further noting that it would be counter-productive to delink agriculture from health or socio economic development.
- 2- There is therefore need and potential to create think-tanks and expert panels- Identify thematic areas that are pertinent in the current environment.

At the member university level

- 1- It is likely that several members will not be in position to fulfil their subscription obligations. Public universities which would have had a slight edge over the private universities may also experience shortfalls in light of cyclic nature of the economy and expected GDP contraction globally. How then do we utilise existing resources at base and position the universities for value add in the agricultural sector, noting that several of the students are now resident in their traditional/home setting thus providing a basis to explore alternative modes of community engagement?
- 2- Position and policy papers/ by member universities. How many countries are benefiting from the World Bank COVID response plan- and how do the member universities position to be active

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players and beneficiaries in this resource –universities should be part of the national preparedness and response plan.

- 3- Sharing resources- 6% of the resources we have are biennial support which means we have to explore how to tap into the activities of the member universities to advance several of the programs under RUFORUM. How then do we structure programs towards sharing resources across the network? A case in point is the MOOCs that have started running in better endowed universities. Partnerships, networks and lesson sharing in teaching as well as in research are likely to guide the way forward.
- 4- How to work together to retool academic staff to offer the practical ag- education in the online mode. How do we explore options for pooling resources and/or approaching large service providers to benefit from economies of scale? Could RUFORUM play a brokerage role in this scenario?

At the Secretariat level.

1. There is going to be a change in how we operate- ICT resources are likely to have predominance in how we function. With implications on ICT hardware and software. Including the human resource retooling.
2. Re-evaluation of the cost drivers of the functions of the secretariat – for possible consideration of austerity measures- what needs to come out and what needs to be in? We are almost concluding the financial year. The focus for the next budget year has to be structured with the reality of changed programming and perhaps reduced resources.
3. Reflection on those activities that can be categorised as ‘fluff’ we do need to sit down and evaluate those services where we can nickel and dime.
4. Resource mobilisation- ‘follow the money’, identify where resources are situated that respond to the challenges of COVID-19 within RUFORUM mandate.

References

This is our fifth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Corona Pandemic. You can get more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also share your thought piece about the Pandemic with us by writing to e.adipala@ruforum.org and copying m.agenam@ruforum.org

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