



## AFRICA

# Universities ask for funding injection in food systems research

**Maina Waruru** 17 June 2021

African universities are calling for increased investment in research and innovation for scientists to explore factors of agricultural production that could be utilised for enhancing sustainable food production and consumption on the continent.

Universities want actors in Africa's development, including governments, to raise funding for science to ensure resources such as land and water are used sustainably, and to ensure that appropriate technologies are generated for the benefit of its growing population.

Adequate funding of scientific research, they noted, will also aid in monitoring threats to agriculture, ranging from diseases and pests, to informing policy formulation, and guide sustainable exploitation of resources across all domains of agriculture including crops, livestock, fisheries and forestry, the universities noted in a communiqué issued during a dialogue attended by African ministers in preparation of the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) that will take place from 26-28 July.

“Without Africa investing in science for its own future, the full benefit of infrastructure investments made in agriculture will not be realised,” said the statement, read by Professor Theresa Nkuo-Akenji, the vice-chancellor, of the University of Bamenda, Cameroon.

This, they said, was in view of the fact that, Africa, and especially Sub-Saharan Africa, still had to realise its full agricultural potential and needed significant funding for productivity-enhancing innovations.

In addition, they asked African governments to “invest strongly” in the education value chain, from universities to vocational colleges and to “leverage on secondary and primary education” to upgrade the skill levels of young people entering the labour force. A broad range of human resources was needed in agriculture, they said.

## Building partnerships

Only a fraction of smallholder farmers on the continent have requisite entrepreneurial ability and, as such, 'skilling' such groups and, in general, improving productivity, is critical for African agriculture if it is to play a greater role in meeting local and global food demand.

In addition, partnerships for co-creation of knowledge, resource mobilisation, scaling innovations and technologies as well as sharing and learning were urgently needed, the statement read to the ministers' forum said.

"African Universities commit to work collaboratively with other actors, including development partners and policymakers in and outside Africa, to marshal the needed response capacity to strengthen Africa's food systems and for scaling up best practices," the institutions added during the event hosted by the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture, or RUFORUM.

The want to build partnerships to operationalise the Strengthening Higher Agricultural Education in Africa, a five-year initiative promoted by RUFORUM and the World Bank as well as initiatives that form part of the African Union's Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy. These initiatives include youth skill and entrepreneurship building as well as enhancing capacity in science, technology and innovation.

In addition, the universities pledged to engage actively in various intergovernmental partnerships: the European Union-African Union Partnership on Food, Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture Initiative, the African Union-European Union Research and Innovation Partnership on Climate Change and the Sustainable Energy and Global Research Alliance on Agriculture Greenhouse Gases. They will also continue to work with other global universities.

### **Universities 'pivotal'**

African ministers for agriculture were in agreement with the views held by the universities, among other matters, acknowledging that there was a need to strengthen the link between university and government. This they noted in a statement read at the event.

The ministers committed themselves to working with the institutions to harness the much-needed response capacity for strengthening the continent's food systems, noting that universities' role was central to realisation of the objective.

"We recognise that a more holistic human capital development is required to build the agricultural workforce, from production to research and innovations as well as entrepreneurship. African universities are pivotal in the design and implementation of human capital development programmes," the statement added.

Equally important, the ministers noted, was the need to develop the outreach function of universities which includes agriculture extension services (work with farmers), and the link between universities and smallholder farmers, said the communiqué read by Erica Maganga, Malawi's principal secretary for agriculture.

According to Professor Ekwamu Adipala, the executive secretary of RUFORUM, a huge gap existed between research and its impact on African agriculture, which was to blame for hunger.

The organisation had supported universities to participate in the UNFSS process, and had engaged key actors, including heads of states and other advocates of Africa's development.

The UNFSS has been designed to, among other matters, raise awareness and provoke public discussion on reforming food systems for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals.

The universities' organisation (RUFORUM) has been picked by the United Nations as one of the UNFSS champions, to "mobilise a diverse range of voices in every part of the world, to engage and develop an inclusive coalition for the transformation of food systems through coordinated actions before, during and after the summit", said Adipala.

In May, vice-chancellors from the universities pledged to support continental initiatives that would support human capital development and increase Africa's capability in research, innovation and entrepreneurship, with the aim of bettering agricultural productivity.

The vice-chancellors have committed to become 'game changers' to transform agri-food systems across the continent for the betterment of the African people, working with national governments and the African Union Commission to identify actions and initiatives to improve the sector.