

## RUFORUM Celebrating 10 years as a Network and 22 years supporting Agricultural Higher Education

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# Celebrating RUFORUM@10

## RUFORUM's DEVELOPMENTAL ROOTS

In over a little more than two decades RUFORUM has evolved from a regional, crop-based network of five agricultural faculties into a blockbuster regional consortium of 32 universities in eastern, central and southern Africa. It is now a wholly African governed and managed network with a Secretariat, housed at Makerere University, which provides the platform for catalyzing change in African higher level capacity building.

The RUFORUM model is deliberately based on a high leverage concept that brings about broad change in universities. Through competitive sub-grants, specialized training sessions and intensive knowledge sharing, it exposes universities to both demand and opportunities to produce more relevant graduates and research to serve poor rural communities. RUFORUM's learning network has been able to impact attitudes, curricula, pedagogical standards and university partnerships

with smallholder farmers and with a wide assortment of agricultural development agencies. By operating in a network mode, RUFORUM creates economies of scale in delivering these services. To date, it has served over 1197 postgraduate students (1005 MSc and 192 PhD) and 2,340 faculty, with nearly 40% of the student grants awarded to women. Its Biennial Conferences attract over 600 participants from inside and outside Africa. Its impactful community action programs have drawn support from numerous funders. And the innovations keep coming. Most recently, nine of RUFORUM's member universities have committed to host a graduate teaching assistants exchange whereby the host university waives fees and provides accommodation for PhD students and staff nominated by their universities. The sending universities provide travel, stipend and research funds. In turn, the host university is eligible to send staff for specialized training to a sister university under the same arrangement.

The next few years will see the consolidation of RUFORUM as a sustainable resource to its regions. RUFORUM will intensify capacity-building in several pilot countries. It will focus on sustainable value chains in both crops and livestock, and scale out many of its regional MSc and PhD programs. Based on its knowledge



Above: Joyce Lewinger Mook

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leadership, it will seek to share these approaches through modern communication and pedagogical techniques. These include new modes of knowledge management and exchange involving Open Education Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) adapted to local ICT and capacity constraints. Learning from these pilots will generate public goods that will serve the entire network and open opportunities for innovation and supportive resource flow.

Fans of RUFORUM often ask how this exceptional organization got its start and why it didn't come into being wholly formed and powerful as it is today. The 2013 publication by Fitzgerald and Lindow, *Dirty Hands, Fine Minds: The Story of an Agricultural research and Training Network in African Universities*<sup>1</sup> largely chronicles RUFORUM's evolution over the last 20 years. The book includes a look at RUFORUM's very early days, when it was a fledgling program, called the Forum, sired by the Rockefeller Foundation and several African agricultural visionaries working with Foundation staff to turn an aspiration for upgrading local university contribution to agricultural transformation into a reality. This dispatch provides a complementary glimpse into the guiding ideas that have directed funder investments, including those of the Rockefeller Foundation, in agricultural higher education in Africa, and in advanced capacity building on the continent more generally.

During the new nation-building era in sub-Saharan Africa, the development of institutions of higher education was influenced by a generally common vision of university purposes and how to achieve them. The notion was that universities would be independent bodies of scholarly and scientific distinction, merit selection and open inquiry. They would serve as the location for most of the nation's advanced training and research. The model closely followed those of the universities in the colonial nations, and to some extent the U.S. (although an effort to introduce the land-grant system in Africa was largely abortive affected by an insufficient mechanism for farming communities to set priorities and guide the research agenda.) Indeed according to conventional development theory of the 1960s, universities were essential to the idea of modernization, fostered by funding agencies. By the 1970s, the model had melded into an instrumental concept of a "development university" with specific socioeconomic purposes and well-appointed special institutes of development studies, integrated rural development, public health and so forth. Thus, the university became more closely aligned with short-range policy priorities or manpower planning. Funding became more project-oriented with the expectation of quick results, the liberal arts and basic science mission more abstract. Cost-effectiveness analyses compared universities adversely to primary education. As we know, these shifts took place against a backdrop of student uprisings (in Africa, as well as overseas), politically driven institutional expansionism and fiscal retrenchment – resulting in loss of quality and in governance instability. Ever since, donor priorities, in the face of cynicism, have presented as a lack of coherent understanding of the university role in Africa and the absence of shared vision.

I rehearse all this to emphasize that the problems with agricultural higher education today are nested within the context of the university as a whole. African higher education institutions for the most part

<sup>1</sup><http://repository.ruforum.org/documents/dirty-hands-fine-minds-story-agricultural-research-and-training-network-african>.

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had not for decades benefitted from a consensus among university leadership, government and society of higher education's development role; the nature of what should be the academic core; and the manner in which engagement in development projects is fed back into the academic core. The reform of agricultural higher education thus situates within needed movements of universities to come to terms with other institutions in the national agricultural transformation system. To do so, they are challenged to convert themselves into institutions building a curriculum that can meet the needs of the 21st century and navigate successfully within new geopolitical landscapes created by both globalization and increased public demands for accountability.

It is remarkable that the peer reviewed Agricultural Investment Plans, required by the CAADP Compact process, had no chapter on the investment plan for higher agricultural education to meet the demands of the growing agriculture and agribusiness sector. As such the plans could be unattainable or inconsistent across sectors. This, undoubtedly, will be corrected in future plans.

The current picture, while uneven across the continent, is an exciting one affected by both world forces that foster Africa's growth and the way Africa is taking advantage of them. The former are well-known. The latter include several factors. The first is generating economies of scale through the establishment of training and research networks. Second is concentration on entrepreneurial and problem solving skill enhancement. Third is promoting quality assurance through interaction, information sharing and peer review. Fourth is strengthening links between university research centers and the re-emerging private sector. Fifth is building a critical mass of female graduates who are highly employable. Sixth is reducing the costs of education through interactive adaptive learning technologies. Seventh is utilizing feedback mechanisms to partners.

RUFORUM presents an encouraging example of the latter characterization (feedback mechanisms) by means of its mutually reinforcing Community Action Research Projects, competitive research grants, field attachments to National Agricultural Research Institutes and NGOs, breakthrough collaborative research methods courses, and overarching guidance from a set of newly created national forums composed of farmers' groups, local government representatives, and university staff.

RUFORUM's recent Business Plan has received good reviews as an example of 32 universities working together to transform themselves through collective action into viable institutional operations responsive to national aspirations and conditions. This is no small accomplishment in the face of graduate programs long in crisis, burgeoning undergraduate enrollments, a rise in the number of universities without adequate and stable financing, and faculty members overwhelmed by undergraduate teaching responsibilities. When RUFORUM began as the Forum only a handful of agricultural PhD programs were functioning in eastern and southern Africa. It was impossible to create new viable ones under circumstances of financial retrenchment and often institutional politicization. Those were the days of overseas PhD study support. However, inadequate preparation at the MSc level had reduced the number of qualified people in the pipeline and undermined the value of the MSc as a terminal degree for

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applying knowledge and skills to address African agricultural problems. Now the MSc, along with an Africa-based PhD, is a very sought-after diploma.

RUFORUM is exceptional because it has found a way of climbing out of what has been a set of severe challenges to higher agricultural education by harnessing opportunities for upgrading the substance and texture of local university teaching, research and outreach through south-south national and regional partnerships backed by international support. It is riding the wave of globalization that is changing our conceptualization of higher education in Africa and its role in society. There are many dimensions to this change but five repeating themes stand out.

- A shift from viewing the generation of new skills and knowledge as ends in and of themselves to a focus on application and realized impacts on the lives of citizens -- particularly the disadvantaged
- An imperative to “leapfrog” to next generation technologies that foreshorten time and distance, and allow for simultaneity and acceleration
- A new complex porousness between the realms of the public and the private – between the public commons and private enterprise
- A tilt from primary concentration on enhancing the talents of individuals to creating viable and lasting professional communities (especially through networks to realize economies of scale)
- Nesting of local capacity building within the growing competition in the global marketplace for high-end talent

An intrinsic role of the university is to envision the future but evidence suggests that this role needs to be balanced by “translational capacity” -- the ability to turn knowledge into use. That balance must include managerial and entrepreneurial skills that lead to job creation, as well as job obtainment. And, the whole enterprise demands an environment whereby newly honed talent can flourish.

There are many ways to support and accelerate the changes already emerging. RUFORUM and its 32 member universities (with more wishing to join) are becoming well positioned to meet the demands of a new yardstick for measuring success – the degree to which investments in higher education help societies in the long and medium term to tilt accrued benefits toward their most vulnerable citizens. Results of this type require a systems approach, such as the one RUFORUM is now developing – one that is selective, strategic, and sequenced in planning; synergistic, leverage-oriented and flexible in operation; and linked with actors who can move where it cannot.

### **The road to Maputo: 21-25 July 2014.**

This is the second in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our 10 year anniversary. The author, Joyce Moock, is a former Associate Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation and was instrumental in founding FORUM, the predecessor programme to RUFORUM. [Click here](#) to see our first release where we announced the anniversary celebrations.

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