

**NEED FOR ENGAGED AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES IN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BY OROCK THOMAS EYONG- REGIONAL CHIEF OF SERVICE FOR VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMMES,SOUTH WEST.**

Universities have a key role to play in society, but does academia in the developing world have additional responsibilities to national economic development? Drawing on cross-cultural examples across the developing world, Calestous Juma (Social Studies, SPRU 1983), Professor of Practice of International Development at Harvard University, argues that African universities need to reinvent themselves to expand their social mission and solve community problems.

Universities are under pressure worldwide to expand their social missions. This is more so in the developing world, and particularly in Africa. Universities and the societies in which they are embedded co-evolve, shaping each other in a variety of ways. This co-evolution is an uncertain process, involving continuous dialogue and interaction.

The first generation of post-independence African universities focused on nation building, with emphasis on providing functionaries for the civil service. Today, African countries are facing new challenges related to participation in the global economy, meeting basic needs, and contributing to the transition towards sustainability. These require increased investment in generating, adapting and diffusing available technical knowledge to local uses. Africa must change the way that its universities operate. First, countries will need to consider universities as productive entities (ie as incubators of new enterprises), and not simply producers of a trained workforce. Secondly, universities and other technical institutes must integrate with their communities.

If African universities cannot reinvent themselves to play a leading role in the transition towards sustainability, enlightened governments should charter other categories of institutions to perform this community function. Fortunately, as the examples highlighted below illustrate, there are many historical and modern examples to guide their reinvention.

The rising interest in Africa's future has coincided with a new awakening of interest within international development agencies in the role of technological innovation in economic growth. But much of the discussion on Africa's development only marginally addresses the need to harness the world's existing fund of knowledge for development.

The Commission for Africa chaired by UK prime minister Tony Blair has,

for example, played an important role in placing the issue on the international policy agenda. But the commission has also pointed out that using existing knowledge for economic development will require governments and other players to focus on strengthening the role of the academic community (as well as business) in development.

Universities and other institutions of higher learning are key players in domesticating knowledge and diffusing it into the economy. But they can only do that through close linkages with the private sector. And that will require major adjustments in the way that universities function in Africa (as well as the rest of the developing world).

Many of these universities will need to be changed from being conventional sources of graduates to becoming engines of community development. In other words, they will need to become 'developmental universities', working directly in the communities they are located in.

The main role of the first generation of African universities was to create civil servants. Unfortunately, this classical model has become the template within which new universities are created, even though social and economic needs have changed radically.

The continent needs a new generation of universities that can serve as engines of both community development and social renewal.

The task ahead is not simply one of raising more funds. It will require deliberate efforts by governments, academia, business and civil society to reinvent higher education and put it to the service of the African people. To achieve this, a qualitative change in the goals, functions and structure of the university is needed.

As part of this process, fundamental reforms will be needed in curriculum design, teaching, location, choice of students and the management of the continent's universities. Such an effort will push African leaders to the frontiers of institutional innovation; nothing less will meet the challenges.

The good news is that Africa has a large number of important innovations in higher education to learn from, many of which are from the continent itself, or elsewhere in the developing world.

Take, for example, curriculum development. One of the most pioneering examples in curriculum reform is EARTH University in Costa Rica, whose curriculum is designed to match the realities of agribusiness, and is therefore

able to dedicate itself to producing a new generation of young people trained specifically to focus on changing the human condition through entrepreneurial activities.

### **Entrepreneurial education: Costa Rica's EARTH University**

In 1948, Costa Rica abolished its army and used part of the saved revenue for health and higher education. This courageous act helped the country prosper and become an economic force in Central America. It is against this background that Costa Rica was able to pioneer a new educational model that trains young people to create enterprises and be employers rather than employees.

EARTH University offers a four-year degree in agricultural sciences. It focuses on training leaders who will help advance sustainable development. By training 'agents of change', EARTH University has developed a unique curriculum based on experiential learning. It focuses on agriculture as a human activity, the integration of many academic disciplines, understanding the changing and globalising world, and the linkages between economic, social and environmental concerns.

Throughout their studies students focus on doing practical work related to crop and animal production; they are required to run their own micro-enterprises using a US\$3,000 loan from the University, undertake project design, feasibility assessment, market study and business management.

### **Community development: Ghana's University for Development Studies**

The government of Ghana established the University for Development Studies (UDS) in 1992. UDS seeks to make tertiary education and research directly relevant to communities, especially in rural areas. It is the only university in Ghana required by law to break from tradition and become innovative in its mission. It is a multi-campus institution in northern Ghana — the poorest region in the country, affected by a high child malnutrition rate and a serious population pressure, and vulnerable to ecological degradation. The University's philosophy, therefore, is to promote the study of subjects that will help address human welfare improvement.

The pedagogical approach emphasizes practice-oriented, community-based, problem-solving, gender-sensitive and interactive learning. The curricula stress community involvement and community dialogue, extension and practical tools of inquiry.

An important component of the emphasis on addressing sustainable

development is an eight-week field practical programme. The University believes that the most feasible and sustainable way of tackling underdevelopment is to start with what the people already know and understand, and therefore the field programme brings science to bear on indigenous knowledge from the outset.

Under this programme, students live and work in rural communities and are required to identify development goals, formulate action plans and help in their implementation. The impact of this innovative training approach is already apparent, with the majority of UDS graduates working in rural communities.

### **Reconstruction: Rwanda's Kigali Institute of Science, Technology and Management**

Reconstruction efforts following the genocide in Rwanda have been associated with an emphasis on the role of science, technology and engineering in economic transformation. This is illustrated by the decision of the Rwandan government to convert military barracks into a home for a new university, the Kigali Institute of Science, Technology and Management (KIST) — the first public technological institute of higher learning in Rwanda.

KIST, set up in 1997, aims to contribute to Rwanda's economic renewal through the creation of highly-skilled manpower by offering courses in science, technology and management; carrying out extensive research activities and knowledge dissemination; and providing technical assistance and services to all sections of the community.

The success of KIST is a combination of enlightened state guidance, supportive international agencies and autonomous management. These factors, when coupled with entrepreneurial executive leadership, can deliver results in a relatively short time. KIST has put to rest the myth that institutions of higher learning, especially universities, take too long to deliver results.

### **Lessons learnt**

The rising interest in Africa's future has coincided with a new awakening of interest within international development agencies in the role of technological innovation in economic growth. But much of the discussion on Africa's development only marginally addresses the need to harness the world's existing fund of knowledge for development. The Commission for Africa has played an important role in placing the issue on the international