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L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century
A África e os desafios do Século XXI
إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

Strengthening African Higher Education and Research Institutions for Addressing the Major Challenges of the 21st Century

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Abstract

The paper to be presented seeks to crystallize issues related to three-inter related themes

a) Catalytic role played by Higher Education and Research Institutions in the promotion of sustainable development

b) The major challenges of the 21ˢᵗ century that higher Education and Research institutions are required to address for achievement of the aspirations of African Governments and

c) The innovative reforms and strategies essential for surmounting the developmental, technological, cultural, political, and other major challenges of the 21ˢᵗ Century.

The first part of the paper focuses on the role played by Higher Education in the achievement of sustainable development, and economic, political and social transformation in Africa. The first World Bank policy paper on Tertiary Education, "Higher Education- the lessons of experience 1994" succinctly identifies four fundamental contributions that these institutions play in promotion of socio-economic development:

1) Tertiary Education and Research institutions enhance effective creation, dissemination and application of knowledge and the building of technical and professional capacity. The ability of a society to produce, select, adapt, commercialise and utilise knowledge is critical for sustained economic growth and improved-living standards. Knowledge accumulation and application have become major factors in socio-economic development and are at the very core of a country's competitive advantage in the global economy.

2) Although globalization has created considerable opportunities for improvement of the progress and welfare of humanity, the process implies increased competition and a high level of technological preparedness which many African countries unfortunately lack. As a result, the benefits of globalisation are unevenly distributed and this phenomenon exacerbates the problems of glaring inequalities and social exclusion. Since knowledge is universal in nature and its pursuit and advancement is based on the free circulation of ideas across borders, scientific fields and academic disciplines, the mission and concerns of Higher Education and Research Institutions, and are in many ways, complementary to those of Globalisation. These Institutions are consequently appropriately placed to positively enhance and sustain the benefits of the process of globalisation through creation of:

a) Relevant intellectual capacity

b) Life-long learning practises and

c) Effective utilisation of the new information and communication technologies.

3) Higher Education and Research institutions can also serve as centres for functional cultural emancipation in Africa. The pursuit of such a mission dispels the foreignness and irrelevance of some of the courses and subjects in the University Curriculum and the Research agenda and the cultural dependency they create and foster.

4) African Universities have a crucial role to play in solving development challenges in their respective countries. The following message of the Director General of UNESCO on the research mission of African Universities is instructive and will be explored and developed in the paper: "Research in African Universities would best serve the needs of the continent if it is focussed on two pillars, (1) the wider world and (2) the African world. In other words, Africans are best suited to research on their own environment, and in every branch of learning, there is a wide range of Africa-specific issues to be fully explored. The greatest challenge to every African University is to lead the way in exploring its immediate environment, in all its facets, using available instruments and resources from the wider world and adapting these to the exploration of local problems."

The second part of the paper will identify and analyse

1) The nature, causes, magnitude and implications of the major global challenges of the 21st century and their efforts and impact on the African Continent. Similarly this part of the paper will also examine current challenges hampering the efficiency and effectiveness of the programmes and services of higher education and Research Institutions.

In the analysis of Global challenges, particular attention will be paid to issues related to

a) Poverty reduction through redistribution and empowerment

b) Fulfilment of the millennium development goals

c) Policies and strategies for combating the pandemic of HIV/AIDS

d) Sustainability of the environment and climate change

e) Promotion of equity and gender equality and

f) Maintenance of democratic good governance and the rule of law

The analysis of the challenges confronting Higher Education and Research Institutions will highlight strategies and mechanisms for making these Institutions innovative and responsive to the needs of challenges of a globally competitive economy and the changing labour market requirements for advanced human capital. Particular attention will be focused on the

importance of

a) Augmenting and improving access and social equity

b) The imperative need for re-introduction of the "Public good" philosophy as opposed to the "Private good" and "Rate of Return" philosophy

c) The issues of quality and relevance

d) The issue of resource mobilisation or funding mechanisms and finally

e) The lessons and impact of Reform Initiatives

The final part of the paper will synthesise the nature, diversity and the root-causes of the global 21st challenges confronting Africa and will highlight the positive innovative role higher Education and Research Institutions can play to effectively address the challenges through the pursuit and implementation of far-reaching, sustained strategic reforms and initiatives.

The development of strategic innovative policies and measures will draw lessons from reform initiatives implemented in a wide range of institutions in the continent. The instructive lessons and experiences if the University of Mackerere in Uganda, the 1997 reform measures of Ethiopia, the 1997 reform measures of Zimbabwe, the establishment of Distance Learning Colleges and Open Universities, the innovative reform of Dar-es-Salam (UDSM) in the late 1990s and the Kegali Institute of Science and Technology, Tanzania.

The paper will conclude by highlighting major determinants of successful innovations and reforms for successfully addressing the complex global 21st Century challenges facing the African continent.