

# Role of Universities in Achieving Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Transformation in Africa



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It is a great privilege for me to speak here today at RUFORUM’s Annual General Meeting. As I mentioned last night during the MOU signing ceremony, several FAO staff have attended RUFORUM meetings in the past and it is well-known to many in the Organization, but it is an honour to be here representing the Organization. We are looking forward to working together more intensively from now onward.

As Tobias Takavarasha mentioned in his remarks earlier, for me as well it is a great pleasure to catch up with many friends and colleagues whom I have not seen for some time. In addition, for me it has been especially interesting to be back in Malawi after a 25-year absence, the last time being 1992. A lot has happened since then and the visit this week and the discussion in the sessions provided an excellent opportunity for reflection on what has happened, and not

happened, since then, what we have learned and how we see things now. What does this reflection say about how RUFORUM and FAO should work together?

In retrospect, 1992 looks like a pivotal year. The Rio Earth Summit was held in June that year, the first International Conference on Nutrition, ICN was held in December. The population of Malawi was nine million, about half of what it is today. Momentous changes were coming politically in the years soon after in Malawi and Mozambique, where I moved the following year, in South Africa and in many of the countries represented here today. The MDGs were still eight years away from formulation and they have now come and gone. We have come together in innovative ways since then, with Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, with the Paris Accord, and of course with the creation of RU-

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FORUM.

Attention given by governments and donors to agriculture was on the decline 1992 but had not yet reached bottom. It recovered starting in 2007 with the food price crisis and, contrary to many expectations, has stayed high in spite of the decline of food prices to previous levels. This interest, I believe, is due to the new recognition of how important agriculture is to the most pressing, complex and inter-connected problems that we face, of food security and nutrition, poverty reduction, sustainable natural resource use and climate change, among others.

It is also important to highlight how much progress has been there since 1992. One point six (1.6) billion people have moved out of poverty and many of your countries have moved up to become middle income economies. Seven hundred fifty million people have risen out of poverty while remaining in rural areas while other millions have moved to cities and remain below the poverty line. We have made enormous progress but it has been uneven. Agricultural production is up as is productivity, but not everywhere. Many people are no better off than they were then, but now with smaller farm size and more degraded land. We had not yet heard of “protracted crises” in 1992, which present enormous challenges, among many others.

Given this backdrop, how do we see agricultural higher education and vocational training fitting in? What is the role of universities, of research, teaching and outreach in light of the progress and the challenges? As I mentioned in my remarks at the MOU signing last evening, I am here primarily to listen and hear what you as RUFORUM leaders have to say and I have listened very intently. Your discussions mirror in many ways other discussions looking at these priority issues and it has been stimulating to hear your views.

I would summarize three themes that seemed to come up most often in your discussions. The first is the need to link your universities to communities, in support of smallholder farmers. This came up repeatedly. Second is the issue of employment and job creation, a topic that I don’t believe we were discussing very much in 1992 or even much more recently. The need to see graduates as job creators and not just as job seekers, an awareness of how many jobs are required and are not there in the formal economy is clearly high on your agenda. Third, a strong theme of your discussions has been on agricultural and rural transformation. This came across as something much larger than increasing agricultural production and productivity, or even of increasing income of agricultural households, but something broader that looked at on-farm and off-farm segments of the food system and included the focus on communities, linking both rural and urban spheres.

Very much related to this were the four big trends and challenges that Simeon Ehui of the World Bank gave us in his remarks yesterday. The first is the demographic challenge of population growth and the need for 375 million jobs for youth between now and 2030. The second big trend is urbanization and the growing demand from urban food markets. Urban food markets already handle 70% of total food supply in developing countries, even in countries with a high proportion of rural population. The value of urban food markets in sub-Saharan Africa is projected to grow from US\$ 150 billion to US\$ 500 billion between 2010 and 2030. The third trend is rising income and shifts in demand for agricultural products. This is particularly true for fish, meat, vegetable oil, fruits and vegetables, eggs, dairy and processed foods.

These trends in rising demand all offer opportunities for smallholder farmers but they also present special challenges

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and there are problems that smallholders need to overcome. The changes tend to favour the concentration of large producers in value chains that are dominated by larger processors and retailers. Smallholders can be very productive but they need policies that reduce the barriers they face in access to credit, inputs and markets, including things like extension services, secure land tenure rights, equity in contracts, and stronger producer associations. Changes in demand alone will not be enough to allow smallholders to take advantage of the new opportunities.

All of these are complicated by the fourth challenge that Simeon Ehui highlighted, climate change. Climate change, most likely growing in intensity, makes progress more difficult and increases risks to agriculture and to rural households, and to governments in supporting development.

Given what I have heard from your discussions and considering the large trends and challenges, what are the implications concerning the role of universities and RUFORUM? In discussing that role a good place to start, of course, is the statement in your logo: “Capacity Building in Agriculture” and your motto of “Training the Next Generation of Scientists for Africa.” This role of capacity building and training of scientists is the starting point but I have been especially impressed this week by the discussion around your more expansive document, RUFORUM Vision 2030. I think it is an exemplary summary of the challenges and what is needed to address them.

Vision 2030 quotes your 2004 Statement of Belief: “Transforming Agriculture in Africa requires innovative scientific research, educational and training approaches. The education sector should be more connected to the new challenges facing rural communities and must build capacity of young people to be part of the transformation of the Agricultural Sector.” Moreover, you set out to do much more and you have a vision of being “vibrant transformative universities to catalyse sustainable inclusive agricultural development to feed and create prosperity for Africa.” You want not just to be transforming institutions but transformative ones. How to achieve this has been the underlying theme, I believe, of the discussions this week. Here are some additional thoughts that have come to mind as I listened and that I hope might be helpful.

First, I believe that your universities are particularly well-placed to understand what is going on in society, in communities and in rural transformation. You have the capacity to understand and bring attention to the drivers of change. This is more important than ever.

Second, I believe your universities have a comparative advantage in pulling pieces together in reassessing the role of agricultural and rural development within national development strategies. We have seen over the past several decades an excessive segmentation in sectoral policy making, with reduced capacity to analyse and understand the dynamics at work in rural economies. We all know that we are in a different context than we were 25 years ago, with much greater demands on off-farm employment and job creation, more complex relationships with urban markets and food systems, and with increased climate risk, among others. Understanding the changes that are underway and preparing people with the skills and knowledge to adapt is vital. Investing in knowledge creation is an urgent priority, as is capacity development to work within this rapidly changing environment. You should be very good for this, with talented and creative people in a variety of disciplines.

From the Vision 2030 document and other discussions, it is clear that you are well aware of the needs. These include critical thinking skills and entrepreneurship, linked to practical skills and vocational training. There is a need for more

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traditional agricultural research tailored to the needs of smallholder farmers and increasingly for small-scale food system operators. Off-farm income and job creation is likewise a top priority, with the need to produce not just qualified job seekers but to turn out an increasing number of entrepreneurs. This needs to go hand in hand with better understanding and interaction with the private sector. This should lead to better analysis and recommendations on what might stimulate greater private sector investment that targets smallholders and the rural and agricultural transformation that you are speaking of. You are clearly aware of these challenges and we look forward to working with you on them.

Another aspect that I think bears highlighting is that many of you are based not in the capital or in megacities but in smaller ones. These smaller cities we believe, may hold the key to finding new ways of working that link urban and rural areas and stimulate development through a more agro-territorial approach. I believe many of you, and your students, are particularly well-placed to understand these dynamics and be catalysts, as you say, for this rural transformation. At the other end of the spectrum, as several others have pointed out, you are particularly well placed to work on continent-wide issues, and are recognized for this.

In concluding, let me say that we believe RUFORUM is a natural partner for FAO. Several speakers have mentioned the mutual benefits of collaboration, which we also see and we hope that we can be helpful. In fairness, I believe that FAO needs RUFORUM more than you need us. Outside of our work on global public goods, which is considerable, almost all of FAO's work is done in partnership with others, adding value to their work rather than as stand-alone projects. This is generally carried out in support of governments but also includes collaboration with institutions like the Kenya National Farmers Union, where Mercy Karanja and I worked together, and at times with universities.

We look forward to working with RUFORUM as a partner and an entry point on several new initiatives, which are covered in the MOU that we celebrated last evening. These include placing students and faculty to work within the context of some of our country projects, making greater use of our e-learning material and working together to advance open data, among other things. I have had a few conversations with others of you on some specific ideas of how we might work together and we are very much looking forward to this expanding relationship.

Finally, I would like to reiterate how much I have enjoyed being here this week and how impressed I have been by the level of organization of the events, by the Government of Malawi and by the RUFORUM Secretariat. It has been a privilege to see RUFORUM in action, to see, as some speakers put it, this "authentic African leadership" and "authentic African innovation" at this particularly important juncture of your evolution. Thank you again for the opportunity to speak and for your attention.

*This is our thirteenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM AGM Digests. You can get more details about the meeting at <http://www.ruforum.org/AGM2017/> and more information about RUFORUM at [www.ruforum.org](http://www.ruforum.org). You many also join us online using Social Media for real time updates. Our Official hashtag is [#Visioning2030](#)*