1. IAEA News

**Benin enhances production and export of soybean using Bio-fertilizers and isotopic technology (Benin)**

Poor soil fertility meant low yields and insufficient income for soybean farmers in the West African nation of Benin. Thanks to the use of bio-fertilizers, improved using isotopic techniques, they have increased their production significantly, with the support of the IAEA in partnership with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). “Inoculation promotes the development of nodules at the roots and thus increases the fixation of atmospheric nitrogen. It is a cost-effective way to increase yields, while improving and maintaining soil fertility,” said Nestor Ahoyo Adjovi, Scientific Director of the National Agricultural Research Institute of Benin (INRAB). As a result, soybean production has increased from 57,000 tons in 2009 to 222,000 tons last year, and its value has grown from US$ 6.6 million to US$ 109 million, according to data from a recent industry publication. During the same period, the cultivated area increased from 64,000 ha to 200,000 ha and yield rose from 890 kg/ha in 2009 to 1100 kg/ha in 2019. It is projected that annual soybean production will hit 341,000 tons by 2030 – a six-fold increase compared to 2009. Benin, which did not export soybeans when support from the IAEA and FAO started in 2009, now exports 40,000 tons at a value of US$ 19 million, annually. With support from the IAEA and the FAO, researchers at the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin, the National Agricultural Research Institute of Benin (INRAB) and several local and international NGOs have helped local farmers to increase the yields of soybean by increasing the nitrogen content of the soil through the natural process of nitrogen fixation from the air, making soybean production environmentally friendly. To facilitate the process of increased nitrogen fixation, researchers at the University of Abomey-Calavi produced inoculum, a biofertilizer that contains microorganisms to enhance the productivity of soil and stimulate crop growth, and also test the efficacy of these bio-fertilizers before releasing them to the Ministry of Agriculture and the NGOs for distribution to farmers. Isotopic techniques were used to establish this efficacy and the ability of the plants to uptake the biofertilizer and fix nitrogen from the air. “Traditional production practices did not allow producers to improve soybean yields above 890 kilograms per hectare, but with current improved production practices, farmers can harvest 1100 kilograms per hectare,” said Ahoyo Adjovi. The improved yield in the farmers’ field is still below the world average of 3370 kilograms per hectare, and scientists continue to work on improving the practices further.

Read more [here](#).

2. University World News

**Defying the notion of ivory tower in aftermath of COVID-19 (Africa)**

Universities throughout the world and those in Africa in particular have been criticised for being ivory towers: aloof, unaccountable and disengaged from the interests of their communities. African universities especially have been incessantly, unfairly and harshly attacked for not lifting the continent out of its cycle of poverty and economic deprivation – as if they were the only players in the complex web of the development universe. This allegation has been on the table for decades – without any vigorous rebuttal from institutions. In fact, this narrative has been instrumental in
shaping the discourse on the contribution of African universities to the development of the continent, supporting the notion that such contribution is insignificant. This article discounts the notion of the ‘Towerisation’ of African universities as the current pandemic is decisively exhibiting their role as frontline institutions in combating the killer disease. In a book chapter in Flagship Universities in Africa, Damtew Teferra observes that the unflattering term ‘ivory tower’ has often been evoked to criticise (flagship) universities as much for their purported inclinations as to what matters most in the international sphere as for their presumed lack of relevance to conditions in their own backyard. Criticism of these institutions has been harsh despite their massive contributions, as measured by the graduates – including doctors, nurses, educators, engineers, architects, accountants, lawyers, and agriculturists, among others – they have produced and their impact on the everyday lives of citizens and nations despite the huge challenges. The long-standing allegations, and charges, have been that the contribution of universities is lacking. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, universities have sent most of their students and staff home. However, many remain involved in a host of activities aimed at combating the disease. Here is a snapshot of direct community-related activities undertaken by universities, in addition to their role in providing life-saving medical services.

Read more here

3. The Conversation

A big effort to invest in education will pay off in the long term for South Africa (South Africa)

South Africa’s economy has consistently been a two-speed economy. It has one of the highest inequality rates in the world, characterised by gaps in opportunities for its citizens and by severe poverty lasting from one generation to the next. In the middle of a global pandemic, the debate is about handling COVID-19 while saving the economy, and less about promoting fast growth and future prosperity. Yet this is an unfair dilemma. Countries in good shape can more easily handle the costs of COVID-19. We see the pandemic as just one more factor intensifying the differences. In that context, the pessimistic outlook for future economic growth is worrisome. What performance can we expect from a country with South Africa’s income level in these challenging global economic conditions? South Africa’s economic growth trajectory from 1990 to 2018 shows two things: persistent income inequality between countries; and a fall in the country’s world ranking from number 80 in the 1990s to 110-120 in the 2010s. If global economic conditions hurt every country’s economy, why has South Africa performed poorly relative to its peers? History does not support the concept of catching up. Poor countries stay poor, rich countries stay rich, and middle incomes also stay put, unless radical structural changes take place. The central message from empirical economics is that inequality continues both between countries and between households within countries. Poverty traps are observed in most developing countries as one generation’s lack of opportunities constrains the next generation. Increasing investment in capital and human capital is good for economic growth. Low- and middle-income countries stay behind in such investments, not only for lack of funding, but also for lack of expectations.

Read more here

4. The Independent
**Makerere University trains staff on e-learning (Uganda)**

Makerere University has started teaching academic staff on how they can develop online learning materials that can be shared with students. This is for purposes of sustaining learning during the lockdown period since education institutions might stay closed. Recently, Makerere top management met during a virtual meeting and resolved to set up a committee headed by Dr Umar Kakumba, deputy vice-chancellor in charge of Academic Affairs to work on modalities of how the university can efficiently adopt online learning. Dr Kakumba notes that the university has drawn both short term and long term interventions on the matter. He adds that they want to activate remote learning via the university e-digital learning, Makerere University E-Learning Environment. “At least we have a starting point. With this, we are going to ensure that staff develops content that will be accessed by all learners. This is just for now. We are still developing a detailed plan which will lead to standardized e-learning at Makerere,” says Dr Kakumba. Associate Professor Jessica Norah Aguti who is also the director of the Institute of Open, Distance, and E-learning, notes the university has started academic staff virtual training which will enable them to conduct online lessons but also develop online learning materials. “Digital learning is requires more skills, approaches and methods of teaching. We must instill the pedagogical principals of e-learning into academic staff members for them to develop simple learning material for the start. Of course, it is difficult for a staff who was used to face to face method to swiftly adopt to the new system but this is the new normal,” shares Dr Aguti. Dr Aguti who has been reviewing several interventions by different education institutions in Uganda notes that she has realized that most of them are just rushed and uncoordinated and likely to benefit only a few. Dr Kakumba argues that although digital learning was introduced into Uganda’s oldest public university almost a decade ago, its practical indicators and utilization have remained unreliable. He notes that introducing e-learning in a university and Uganda at large could base on the level of availability of infrastructure, technical support, clear policies on implementation, evaluation and curriculum re-orientation which altogether need to work out.

Read more [here](#).

### 5. The Conversation

**We think there’s a better way to assess the research of African academics: here’s how (Africa)**

In the past two decades, much has been made in academic circles about global rankings of educational institutions. Bodies such as Times Higher Education and Webometrics regularly rank universities based on a set of criteria. These include internationalisation of faculty and students, cited research publications and awards won by scholars. This ranking phenomenon has increased the pressure on academics and researchers in Africa to present their research output in publishing outlets that are perceived as highly rated. Career progression – for instance, access to grants, appointments and promotions – is now tied to individual ranking. Student enrolment and funding from government and other bodies to institutions are equally being influenced by institutional ranking. Since the Western world usually leads in setting the criteria, academic prestige comes from conforming to Western standards in the execution and reportage of research projects. But some African researchers are now asking questions about the fairness, transparency and reliability of these processes of evaluation and scholarly rankings. They are also concerned about the effect of Western expectations on African societies and their needs. What matters most in scholarly
evaluation is itself a matter of enquiry. Hence the need to acknowledge and accommodate the inherent limitations of funding, access, collaboration, standardisation and other constraints faced by developing countries. The desire of scholars and institutions in Africa to fit into the Western-imposed model despite the deficit of local research support infrastructure may be counterproductive in the quest to achieve sustainable development in Africa. I belong to a group of African researchers in Nigeria who are concerned about this situation. We reviewed the status quo and conducted a survey to get the perspectives of researchers and education administrators from developing countries. Read more here

6. Daily Nation
How existential flaws sink public universities (Kenya)
The spread of the coronavirus and the disease is causes, Covid-19, has disrupted nearly every aspect of life. The pandemic has tested the relevance of institutions and organisations. Indeed, Covid-19 is not only a health-related challenge but also a problem that affects the economy and organisation of our society and politics. Here in Kenya, like elsewhere in the world, the coronavirus pandemic has thrown universities into uncertain waters by forcing many of them to begin online teaching, and to disseminate research using online platforms. Many of the public universities did not have this capacity. But the teaching staff have quickly learnt how to engage new skills. It is a revolution in many ways. Outside of this revolution, the coronavirus has revealed the existence of ‘two-universities-in-one’ in our public universities. It has shown that we have both the ‘administrative university’ and ‘academia’, existing parallel to each other. Both universities have different interests, powers and influence. Of these two universities, the ‘administrative university’ is the most powerful and influential. It comprises administrators, finance officers and support staff. Procurement officers, security officers and powerful bursars are part of this university The administrative university is also the largest of the two. In terms of numbers, the staff in the administrative university are four times more than the teaching staff. Worried about this trend and its impact on quality education, on February 18, Education Cabinet Secretary George Magoha pointed out the need to cut the number of support staff. Prof Magoha underlined that the ratio of lecturer to support staff in some public universities is one to six. In some of the smaller universities, the ratio is even more scary. Some of them have a ratio of one teaching staff to nine administrative staff. The older universities do not perform better on this either. These figures have prevented universities from increasing the number of teaching staff. Some of the most established have a ratio of one full-time lecturer to one part-time lecturer. Read more here

7. University World News
Pandemic exposes need for new university funding strategy (Africa)

As governments around the world redirect capital spending towards mitigating the socio-economic impact of the pandemic and health sector requirements, universities are bracing themselves against the financial impacts on their own operations. Jamil Salmi, tertiary education expert and former World Bank tertiary education coordinator, told University World News the most urgent task for African countries was to “design and implement a sustainable financing strategy” to support their higher education systems. “As in other parts of the world, African universities are going to be hit hard by the economic recession brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic,” he said. “Unless governments are able to provide a financial package to rescue the higher education sector, the loss of fees will most likely result in private institutions closing down and public universities, which also rely heavily on fees, for example in Kenya and Uganda, also being forced to cut expenditures drastically,” he said. Salmi said very few universities in the world had learned the lessons of previous crises, such as the SARS epidemic in 2002-03 or the Ebola epidemic in 2014, and included risk management in their strategic planning and daily operations. “As a result, most universities have been caught totally unprepared by the current crisis, first, in terms of their capacity to switch rapidly and effectively to online teaching and learning and, second, in terms of building financial reserves to protect them through difficult economic times,” Salmi said. “The only universities able to ride the storm more easily are those that have the capacity to participate in research programmes to find a treatment or vaccine against COVID-19, or produce medical supplies to help during the health emergency.” Salmi said coming up with a sustainable financing strategy involved two dimensions: resource mobilisation and resource allocation. “In the first instance, they need to mobilise sufficient resources, public and private, to be able to expand enrolment in an equitable manner, improve the quality and relevance of all programmes, and strengthen the research and technology transfer capacity of African economies. “Among the possible income generation strategies that universities can put in place, continuing education and fundraising may be the most effective approaches. Parallel fee-paying programmes are highly inequitable and should be eliminated,” Salmi said. “In the second instance, it is important to rely on funding allocation mechanisms that are directly linked to the performance of universities,” he said.

Read more here

8. Daily Nation

University of Nairobi to get lion’s share of Sh6.6 billion salary raise (Kenya)

The University of Nairobi will get the biggest share of the Sh6.6 billion that the government has offered staff in higher learning institutions as part of their 2017-2021 collective bargaining agreement (CBA). The move will see a total of 32,000 staff in public universities get a pay rise after Parliament approved the payment in a supplementary budget last month. The University of Nairobi, with 4,500 staff members, will get Sh1.2 billion, Kenyatta University Sh677 million, Moi University Sh610 million, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology Sh547 million, and Bomet University College Sh11 million. Universities Academic Staff Union (Uasu) appeared before the Labour and Employment Court for hearing of the case which has been pushed to June 8. Universities are now expected to pick letters from the Education ministry outlining disbursement of the funds for the three financial years: 2017/2018, 2018/2019, 2019/2020. “Stay tuned and avoid talking too
much about the CBA now,” said Uasu Secretary-General Constantine Wasonga in a letter to the lecturers. The deal is part of the disputed Sh8.8 billion 2017-2021 CBA signed between unions and universities' management in October 2019. Implementation was to start in November 2019 but was delayed because the government had not factored the pay rise in its current budget. The money will benefit members of Uasu, Kenya University Staff Union and Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions Hospital and Allied (Kudheiha). At the same time, Uasu has filed a case challenging the decision by Egerton and Kisii universities to deduct money from employees’ salaries. The universities announced salary reductions of between 30 to 40 per cent on grounds they had not received money from the Treasury. Egerton University Vice-Chancellor Rose Mwonya said the institution was unable to generate enough funds. “The university management board resolved that ... staff in grade One to Four receive full net salary while those in grades Five to 19 will get 60 per cent of their net pay and the balance will be settled as soon as funds are available,” Prof Mwonya said. Read more here

9. University World News

Ongoing closures threaten viability of private universities (Ghana)

The future of the private universities in Ghana looks gloomy and their existence will be jeopardised if the closures of the institutions to contain the COVID-19 pandemic continue beyond June this year, the president of the Council of Independent Universities, Daniel Obeng-Ofori, has told University World News. “The coronavirus has affected the financial situation of private universities in the country, with some not able to pay salaries for March and April because most students left the campuses with about 50% of unpaid fees following the closure of institutions due to the pandemic,” Obeng-Ofori, who is also the vice-chancellor of the Catholic University College of Ghana (CUCG), said in an email exchange. “The universities cannot hold it anymore should the closure of schools go beyond June 2020,” he said, adding that “students are still owing the universities for services rendered to them, which is about 40% to 50% of their fees”. The CUCG, for instance, has not yet reported any lay-offs of staff and faculty, but this is likely to change should the pandemic persist for a longer period, due to the unpaid fees, he said. “This already poses a challenge for us in the effective management of the institutions since we are having challenges paying salaries and other expenses that fall due,” Obeng-Ofori said. He said private universities in Ghana already have cash flow issues due to reduced admission numbers. The Ministry of Education is yet to come up with any plans to assist them. “The Ministry of Education has not given any assistance in any form to private universities,” Obeng-Ofori said, adding that the Council of Independent Universities had applied to government for financial assistance and was hopeful that the response would be favourable. On how they are responding to academic work in the wake of the pandemic, he said that even before COVID-19 the independent universities had put in place systems for e-learning. “The percentage of its use was about 20%-50% to help teaching and learning but the current pandemic has resulted in a 100% use as a substitute for face-to-face lectures.” Obeng-Ofori said online teaching and learning started as soon as the universities were closed. Following this, lecturers sent their teaching notes, PowerPoint slides and other materials to students through emails, WhatsApp platforms and Google Classroom. Read more here
10. University World News

**Filling the digital skills gap requires a new academic model (Africa)**

It is the year 2020, and the world is not the same as it used to be. A villager is able to receive mobile money without a smartphone; drones are able to deliver medical supplies including blood to some of the least accessible parts of the world and a farmer can track crop prices online. The fourth industrial revolution (4IR), characterised by rapid breakthroughs in technology related fields, has been brought into even sharper focus this year, and digital sceptics are forced to confront the shift to digital with the COVID crisis acting as a catalyst. A world of constant change promises disruption across all sectors, requiring more complex skills and retraining of the workforce. More than 130 million new jobs will likely emerge across the globe before 2030. To understand how serious the future skills gap will be, we only need to look at what global CEOs are saying. PwC research from October 2018 surveyed 1,378 chief executives from more than 90 territories on the availability of 4IR skills: 79% of global CEOs said that they are concerned about the availability of key skills, and in Africa that figure jumps to 87%. Of even greater concern is that 45% are ‘extremely concerned’. So, what are the key skills of the future? According to an LEK Consulting-International Finance Corporation study, Digital Skills in Sub-Saharan Africa, different skill sets will be needed, with socio-behavioural and digital capabilities the most critical for success. Employers, according to the study, consider digital skills among the top seven required for the future workforce. But to create the kind of education ecosystem that equips graduates with the behavioural and digital skills they (and industry) need is less straightforward: it requires a paradigm shift in attitude towards curricula, teaching pedagogies and how to provide students with the highly flexible, mobile mindset that they will need in the 21st century workplace.

Read more [here](#).

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