The Nairobi Report: Frameworks for Africa-UK Research Collaboration in the Social Sciences

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As the world awaits the arrival of the *TaTa Nano,* the cheapest car in the world, with bated breath, it is crystal clear that the Indian subcontinent is poised to take a leading global role in technology. India's research and development agenda over the last two decades or so has already borne fruit with her motor and electronic industries edging out erstwhile European and American corporate giants.

Similarly, South Korea and Malaysia, two Asian countries with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) comparable to those of Kenya and Ghana in 1960, have over the last 40 years invested heavily on research and development. Today, they have crawled out of the mud of underdevelopment and joined the fast-growing Asian Tigers category. Samsung, with the astounding liquid crystal display electronics, attests to the great spirit of research and enterprise in South Korea.

Sadly, Africa south of the Sahara (with notable exceptions in South Africa) has lagged behind in development due to myriad factors chief among which is lack of a sustained and focused research and development agenda. Ghana and Kenya wallow in near-abject poverty while their independence comrades, South Korea and Malaysia chalk up impressive GDPs and very high quality of life among their citizens.

In a bid to address the lamentable state of research in Africa, the British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth universities engaged in a two-year dialogue with senior academic, university administrators and consultants. The purpose of the dialogue was to identify research gaps and make pragmatic recommendations to African universities, governments and academics.

In the developed world, academics are required to consistently update the state of their knowledge and expertise. Indeed, any academic who aspires to scale up the arduous ladder of academic promotion must produce incontrovertible evidence of research and publication. The

publish or perish dictum sanctions the academic life of lecturers with many ending up in the academic wilderness or garbage can; a few get promoted or/and tenured guaranteeing them a longer life in the academy. The productive academics occupy a central place in addressing issues relating to quality assurance and quality enhancement in academic programs. As a result, the graduates of such serious academies are well endowed to address life issues that require innovation and adaptation thanks to their research training.

In Africa, the demand for higher education has increased tremendously in the last 20 years. In Kenya, for instance, the demand has been so overwhelming that virtually all the middle-level technical colleges and polytechnics have been converted into university colleges. This means that the engineers will have to do without technicians in the future. Further, erstwhile drinking dens in the backstreets of Nairobi have also been "upgraded" to university college status. While these initiatives are laudable and almost inevitable, they raise a central question of quality of education and more cogently, the quality of the academics teaching in those institutions.

The Nairobi Report captures the dearth of qualified academics in Africa and makes practical recommendations on how the situation can be reversed. The recommendations derive from conversations between UK and Africa researchers and underscore the need for more collaborations and partnerships; between African academics to begin with; and between African and UK universities. The report further states that African research should be anchored within "African intellectual frameworks and embedded in African approaches".

The Report presents six main parts. An executive summary sums up the entire report emphasizing the need to reinvigorate research in Africa in order for the continent to make significant strides in development. What is abundantly clear is that African countries are faced with the daunting challenge of investing further in research at a time when they are already reeling under the effects of unfair global trade practices and the collapse of global finance markets.

The second part deals with recommendations to revive and sustain African research. The recommendations range from what universities and governments need to do to what individual academics can do to reverse the negative trend in research and development. For instance, universities can pool their intellectual resources to write bids for research or consultancy. They can also conduct joint masters and PhD supervision to produce a critical mass of highly-qualified academic staff. The current trend of competition between universities can only hamstring their intellectual expansion since none of them is capable of producing PhDs in a sustained manner.

Governments can also lobby the UK and other development partners to ease their visa requirements for African academics to be able to travel abroad for further research and intellectual updating. The current situation is lopsided in favor of foreign academics who can

obtain visas within minutes at Kenyan airports; Kenyan academics need voluminous and cumbersome documentation, interviews and excessive visa fees to be able to travel to the UK for instance.

Individual academics can also take the initiative to mentor junior or not-so experienced academics in the areas of research and publishing. Currently, most senior academics lord it over the junior fellows in lieu of encouraging and scaffolding them to attain to higher levels of scholarship. Consequently, most African university departments are teeming with MA holders with dim scholarship and PhD holders whose only evidence of research in the last 20 years is the PhD dissertation. This situation is not only lamentable but inimical to Africa's overall development.

In the Introduction, *The Nairobi Report* contends that while the Natural and Exact sciences continue unchallenged to enjoy a place of pride in our universities, there is a strong case for revitalizing the Social Sciences and Humanities. While the former provide us with glimpses of the physical world and expatiate on the formation of the universe, the latter provide us with sound analytical and critical tools that help us solve the daily challenges of life. In addition, the social sciences and humanities offer perspectives on communication, history, culture, political systems, economics and much more; these skills, knowledge and attitudes are indispensable to a full and meaningful life. Despite the obvious benefits, African governments have continued to under-fund or design out Social Sciences and humanities from their programs thus producing mechanical graduates bereft of creativity and innovation; inarticulate in communication; naïve of their own history and irrelevant to their context.

The tendency among African universities to tail courses to meet the so-called market demands is indeed a welcome move. However, there is a danger in this reductionist view of university programming. The academy while remaining relevant to the industry should soar above the immediate parochial concerns and address the future needs of the society. To do this, it must be both reactive and proactive. Designing out courses like philosophy, anthropology, geography, languages, etc simply won't do since these disciplines are vital in logic, critical argumentation and analysis, the very cornerstones of a successful life.

In parts 2, 3 and 4, *The Nairobi Report* details how institutions can enhance their governance structures to support and promote research and publishing. The idea of *communities* rather than *centers* of excellence underscore the importance of pooling resources among universities to promote research collaboration and partnership. Further, avenues to enable African academic acquire PhD qualifications are presented via regional partnerships such as Ushepia, split-site arrangements and distance learning approaches.

In sum, *The Nairobi Report* is a welcome document coming at a time when serious reservations are being voiced about the Kenya Vision2030 and other similar visions by African governments. In the absence of a focused and sustained research and development agenda, Africa will, in the pessimistic terms of René Dumont, remain forever on the take-off tarmac. She will be taxing forever on the take-off lane, with no take-off in sight.