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Repositioning RUFORUM to adapt to the changing landscape and to cope up with global funding melt-down

It is now six months since the early cases of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) were reported in China. The global infections have reached over eight million, over 450,000 deaths and are still rising. Measures taken by governments at national and regional level have had a knock on effect on the global economy with permeating effects to local and household level. The world's topmost economies such as the US, China, UK, Germany, France, Italy, Japan and many others have taken a significant hit and are at the verge of unprecedented recessions. This has caused significant disruptions in Overseas Development Assistance that these countries have often provided to developing States as reprioritisation is

judiciously implemented.

Development work in most parts of the world including Africa is primarily funded through the Overseas Development Assistance and by philanthropists who in many ways derive their contributions through national budgets and the functioning markets and viability of their enterprises. COVID-19 is creating clogs into revenue streams for both governments as well as private sector individuals and yet at the same time, governments in nearly all countries are making considerable investments at country level to respond to the COVID-19 situation. Accordingly, reprioritization have been undertaken. This will have effects on the available funding for development assistance that often supports non-governmental organisations operations. However, not all hope is lost in this context, because the re-prioritisation is helping some development assistance priority actors especially those in the frontline health care work. At the same time, industries and other sectors of the economy are beginning to undertake a re-imagination to align with the pandemic effects and to address the challenges that the pandemic has caused.

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), is a network of 126 universities from 38 African countries. RUFORUM is a network committed to realising vibrant transformative universities that catalyse sustainable inclusive agricultural development to feed and create prosperity for Africa. RUFORUM's growth and expansion in

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the continent is illustrative of its relevance and commitment to Africa. In particular, under its Vision 2030 Strategy, RUFORUM is committed to better student attitudes, teaching and learning, research excellence, community engagement, enhancing innovation and creating opportunities, knowledge generation and sharing, support to policy dialogue and reform, and fulfilling the potential of women in agricultural science, technology and innovation.

RUFORUM's funding like for other development actors in the Africa region has been through philanthropy and Overseas Development Assistance as well as from African governments through membership contributions and subscriptions to regional programmes such as the [Graduate Teaching Assistantships](#) (GTA) Programme that RUFORUM is employing to strengthen staff capacities in African universities. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the world, the risk of a funding gap in RUFORUM's programming certainly rises. However, we are comforted by the fact that with or without COVID-19, the Africa region will not be getting out of the old problems that have affected the continent's progress: limited quality education, limited capacity in higher education both of academic staff and technical staff, low innovation outputs and knowledge translation, poor health care systems with thousands of people dying of communicable and non-communicable diseases including HIV/AIDs and malaria, among others. The continent's agriculture is under-performing with millions of smallholder farmers that feed the continent still stuck in poverty, pressing unemployment orchestrated by ill-aligned education systems producing graduates that are job seekers but whose entrepreneurial capacity is considerably high. COVID-19 is simply adding pressure into these already pressing challenges that greatly impinge on less resilient people, societies and economies.

A recalibration of society and national and regional priorities will be urgently required to respond to these nested and complex problems taking into consideration the immediate, medium and long-term perspectives. Considering that COVID-19 is providing a re-set button at present for a number of priorities, it is thus important to consider these resets that the pandemic is bringing with venom without seeking to run over all our national and regional development prioritisation. The African Union Agenda 2063, the United Nations Agenda 2030, Global Health Goals, and Country Development Visions such as the Uganda Vision 2030, and Kenya's Big Four Agenda are still relevant and not obsolete. It is important to note that COVID-19 is just one of the infectious diseases among the 7,000 being monitored by the World Health Organisation on a monthly with potential devastating effects. The potential of others with perhaps more devastating effects arising is certainly high. Thus, how do African countries and African institutions use the current pandemic as an opportunity to build institutions that are in better position to appropriately respond within time with the right

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innovations and solutions is the challenge that COVID-19 poses to Africa and the world at large.

Financing regional level institutions such as RUFORUM at this current time of crisis makes a lot strategic sense as they play a pivotal role in providing regional level coordination, brokering of partnerships and collaborations required for responding to challenges at regional level and provide support to institutions and countries with limitations in terms of human capacity as well as technical capacity. It is certainly true that we are in the middle of the storm but sooner than later, this giant wave will reach a point of calmness. It is imperative that we do not lose on any moment particularly in looking beyond the current storm to a possibility of 20-30 storms ahead of us. In order to do this, funding is required to keep institutions that are working to work better, more efficiently and more collectively than ever before.

The world has seen immense investment in the United States, Europe, Japan, Korea, Canada, Brazil, China and India in terms of resuscitating their economies and preventing them from the total collapse. Global investment into the COVID-19 pandemic response is estimated at over 50 trillion dollars to date in just under six months of commitment. Many African countries have similarly responded within their means but a number of them are still taking loans from the World Bank (39 of the 100 countries that have received financing are from sub-Saharan Africa). Most of these countries are taking these loans for addressing the immediate needs of their communities rather than investment in long-term priorities that will enable a sustained recovery and resilience of countries and regions in Africa.

Africa remains vulnerable to infectious diseases and other natural and human induced calamities. Institutions such as RUFORUM that have in the past several years focused on building human capital resources through higher education using locally-based universities and research institutions remain critical even in the current crisis. Human capital development is urgently required in all facets of Africa, it is a systemic issue owing to shortages in nearly all sectors. This requires collective and collaborative action at continental level, regional and national level. A collaboration with institutions such as the Africa Centers for Disease Control (Africa CDC), Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), Association for Research Universities in Africa (ARUA), among others, is critical in building regional frameworks for long-term interventions. RUFORUM's running models for mobilizing and building consensus have over the years delivered significant results that are beneficial to Africa as a whole. These strategies that have over the years provided transformative ideas could be considered in a recalibrated mode to help support the continent's higher education institutions and universities to collaboratively work on recovery and resilience building process now and in the future. In the recovery period, effort must be

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made to catalyse regional provision of solutions to the diverse groups including those at risk and most vulnerable populations.

As a network of universities, it makes a lot of logical sense to work with the private sector but universities need to be seen to provide solutions to the private sector. In this case, it becomes critical for the RUFORUM network to recalibrate its operational approaches to ensure that it is possible for the private sector to invest in the network to support the delivery of innovations as well as products, especially in terms of technology solutions. Most universities have apathy for engagement with the private sector but in this COVID-19 situation, the private sector has demonstrated that it can be a dependable partner within and outside Africa that universities and higher education institutions and research centres ought to work with in a recalibrated manner. Universities are not only markets but also providers of solutions, skilled labour and innovators and as such should invest in building robust and long-term partnerships with private sector and where there is a lack of such, governments should not shy away from taking bold steps and investment in the universities to pilot these through technology and innovation parks. The case of Moi University with support of the Kenya Government in running a textile industry for the Kenya, running an assembly plant to provide laptop computers to schools in Kenya, and running a state of the art Aircraft flying School give a clear example that with foresight, commitment and Government support, African Universities can do more for the Continent. Universities in Zimbabwe, Algeria and Uganda have worked side by side with their Governments and industries to respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic with necessary industry products and medical support. There is a common saying that in business where there is no demand, you create one! It simply means you are creating a totally new industry and it is innovation at the heart of this, this is what the private sector would perhaps put its money but it would also go a long way in responding to the continent's challenges of youth unemployment. Through a network like RUFORUM, conversations on these sort of innovative perspectives to approaching Africa's challenges could provide a basis for their relevance and meaning for sustained financing.

As such, RUFORUM needs re-strategize at three levels or Stages:

- a) Responding to the pandemic by helping network universities to reorganize and better position to address the effects of the pandemic; in particular; (i) recalibrate the network's operations to focus on supporting and brokering linkages for responding to the immediate needs of universities including leveraging virtual learning technologies and capacities; (ii) responding to immediate needs of students especially international students that are stranded within African universities campuses; (iii) supporting on-going research that is time-dependent as well as that

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which responds to the COVID-19 pandemic situation through developing responsive innovations and enterprises-products; (iv) initiate dialogue and engagement with policy and decision leaders for securing a platform for addressing immediate and long-term needs for institutions of higher education.

- b) Recovering from the crisis through medium-term level interventions leveraging the collaborative power of the RUFORUM network and engagement with partners within and outside Africa. Accordingly, the RUFORUM network through this medium-term point transition phase will need to; (i) further examine and redefine the sustainability of interventions undertaken for the future and potential future risks; (ii) restore universities operations by re-examining university financial models and management processes to support evolution of robust as well as frugal financial systems in universities; (iii) support the development of analytical capacities of universities especially in establishing and utilizing big-data to better monitor and track trends and patterns so as to better predict risks to institutional management and development patterns; (iv) put significant investment in information and communication technologies, virtual learning spaces and systems and advance the innovation capacity of universities in Africa; and (v) universities collaboratively address the issue of closing the digital divide among the students ranks and cohorts as well as students transitioning in learning processes and systems so as not to further exacerbate the inequalities in higher education and the broader education value chain.
- c) Foundations for the future and building resilience to future risks and shocks through re-imagining the higher education sector. COVID-19 has revealed that the higher education sector is vulnerable to crises like any other sector of the economy, and as such universities need to buffer against future crises; (i) developing diversified revenue and income streams to support university operations-innovations, enterprise development, strengthening endowment funds and strategic investment including in securities; this is part of ensuring contingency capacity to manage the potential financial risks in the future; (ii) re-imagine the purpose and place of higher education in society as well as redefining the manner in which higher education is delivered and build relevant and applicable capacity in the delivery of a recalibrated education system; and (iii) closer collaboration and engagement with policy, decision leaders and private sector to up investment into education as a strategic response to support universities and education systems innovation, preparedness and response capacity.

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This is our tenth issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our RUFORUM Thought Pieces on the Corona Pandemic. You can get more information about RUFORUM at www.ruforum.org. You may also share your thought piece about the Pandemic with us by writing to e.adipala@ruforum.org and copying m.agen@ruforum.org

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