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OPTIONS FOR RESEARCH GRANTING MECHANISMS

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INTRODUCTION

Research, which is systematic search for new or advancement knowledge particularly for solving problems facing mankind, is key to the development of any nation. Nations that are currently considered developed, newly industrialized or are in the course of doing so have always placed research on well defined areas at the forefront of their national endeavours. Industrialization is not a chance thing and neither is imposed from outside. The foundation and the cornerstones must be laid by each country concerned. The chief cornerstone is research.

Africa, especially the Sub-Saharan Africa, is particularly disadvantaged in terms of research and research outputs. Sub-Saharan Africa region is plagued by many problems – poverty and hunger, diseases of near pandemic proportions, misuse or under utilization of resources (natural and human), etc. This state of affairs is often blamed on the advent of slavery and thereafter colonization. Whereas these could be true, one may be forced to argue that the time that has elapsed since these eras ended may have been enough to erase the past to bury their ghosts and move on as some countries known as the Asian Tigers have done. I posit that Sub-Saharan Africa continues to lag behind because its priority in research has been dismal to say the least. I say this because, for example, research in Kenya during the colonial era focused on and therefore prioritized agriculture and we see this reflected in research institutions geared to this end, e.g., The Coffee Research Foundation, The Kenya Tea Foundation, Kenya Agriculture Research Institute, Kenya and Forestry Research Institute. These institutions have generous government support to produce crops that were disease resistant, fast maturing and best suited to the various geographical and climatic conditions pertaining to Kenya. These institutions could be credited with fair success though it appears that their mandate excluded process that involves value addition during the colonial time and this sorry state of affairs has continued to date, and some of these gains have been wiped out by rapid population explosion and other emerging trends/issues.

The colonial prioritization of research areas in Africa and even the eventual degradation of these areas in Sub-Saharan Africa underscore that outward looking sector specific prioritization together with the gradual and sustained development of the accompanying areas should have been the paths this region undertook. Since this region also faces nearly the same problems, some of the challenges should have been and should be tackled regionally rather than at national levels. This emphasizes, therefore effective/substantive regional research collaborations and not loose networks that nothing to show except minutes/reports of meetings.

Many players: multilateral institutions and agencies, bilateral donors, donor institutions, philanthropists, etc. have tried to address the development challenges of the Sub-Saharan Africa region. In short, we have witness this region become the experimental ground of diverse ideas and policies, more often than note emanating from outside the region. As at now, these varied efforts have not succeeded much, especially in building self sustainable research capacity to tackle the myriad development needs that this region face and also to place amongst the other regions of the world in terms of technology development and advancement.

The failure or common thread noted in the many countries of Sub-Saharan Africa is to allow what should be their “strategic issues/interests” dictated from elsewhere. Consequently the research areas which ought to have been the foundations for further development have been starved of funds or feebly supported and therefore suffer or stagnate or just die off. Besides, where attempts have been made to set aside research funds, these funds have not only been inadequate, they have been set aside in environments that lack institutional capacities for critical proposals evaluation, disbursement and monitoring of funds and post funding impact assessment and evaluation.

RESEARCH GRANTING MECHANISMS

At this stage, I wish to propose - based on observation of the bad and good practices that I have noted in Kenya – some mechanisms that can be avoided or improved or adopted.

In order to address the ever increasing challenge of financing higher education, the Kenya Government has been advancing loans to students pursuing undergraduate education. In the 1990’s it created the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) to advance loans to students using some means tested formula and recover, at modest interest, the borrowed money. This therefore creates a revolving fund. In the recent years (2000s) HELB has started advancing loans to applicants wishing to pursue postgraduate degrees (masters and PhDs). The import of advancing loans to this latter group of students has seen an upsurge of students pursuing postgraduate studies (fueled by the higher rates of return). Increased number of postgraduate students concomitantly has seen gradual increase in research output. Since this is a policy evolvment I would wish that such funding schemes be strengthened and the funds loaned out should include or have a proviso of increment to carter for the research phase of the studies unlike now where they tend to cover only the tuition fees. Available (adequate) determine, more often than not, the quality of the research undertaken. This is one funding mechanism I would strongly encourage.

In the recent past (2 – 3 years), the Kenya Government has allocated in its annual budget (estimates) research funds of the order of US\$250,000. This good but small intention, however, has not been matched by strong institutional management mechanisms. The consequence of

this is that large parts/ chunks of the money often get returned back to the treasury at the end of the financial year without being dispersed implying under utilization. Sub-Saharan African governments, individually, should enhance such research funds and build strong institutions to manage them. Upon these they should set specific regional or sub-regional research funds to address specific issues common to them and demand accountability and results.

One of the most successful foreign/external source of funding, in my opinion with visible and admirable impact, is the SIDA-SAREC of Sweden, albeit there have been changes in their policies that may negate the good practices they have had. SIDA-SAREC have often identified specific research groups in some developing countries, and built long term funding arrangements with them. These arrangements have had commendable impacts on research capacities (human and equipment) and outputs the institutions they have relations with. Besides, they allow these institutions/research groups to determine their research areas. With close supervision of fund usage and outputs, considerable successes have been reported. From example, the author's research group has for about a decade been supported by the Uppsala University's International Program on Physical Sciences (IPPS) that draws considerable part of its funds from SIDA-SAREC. From this support, we have managed to build and continue build research capacity (researchers and equipment). By the end of 2009 we would have 4 PhDs that have been in sandwich programmes with Uppsala University. Besides, we have graduated a number of MScs. Many research students from the local universities and regionally also visit our laboratory to use the equipment acquired from IPPS funds. IPPS has had this experience for many years and their mode of operation that has largely been successful is worthy of emulating.

In the early 1990s the World Bank availed funds to the Government of Kenya to update the "teaching" equipment and human training at the public universities. In my opinion this was not a very successful program. The "teaching" equipment was supposed to exclude research equipment, and the few that were purchased were "sneaked" in. Further, a number of teaching, technical and administrative staff got funds for further training in developed countries. A sizable proportion of these never returned back after the completion of their studies. Besides, some technical and administrative staff after training soon retired or resigned from the universities. The funds' usage was administrative heavy, and the purchase of equipment not transparent and far removed from the users.

There are also cases noted in Kenya where are number of case where "donors" have preferred to channel the funds through NGOs on the premise that the channeling funds through the government results in wastage through corruption. The NGOs are also not innocent of corruption.

In conclusion, I have mentioned about four funding mechanisms; two internal and two external. In all cases strong institutional mechanisms to manage and follow-up usage are instrumental in

any research granting mechanism, and this is an area of concern in Sub-Saharan Africa that must be addressed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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