

RUFORUM Celebrating 10 years as a Network and 22 years supporting Agricultural Higher Education

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Celebrating RUFORUM@10

THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE AND ITS SKILLS REQUIREMENTS IN AFRICA - IN RESPONSE TO THE AFRICAN UNION VISION 2063

Salutations

I would like to start by expressing my deep appreciation for the opportunity to join – what I am coming to respect as a formidable – deeply rooted and oriented African led organisation – RUFORUM at the board level. When I accepted to join I was not aware that part of my induction would be the need to – make a maiden speech – clearly I now know that there are no free dinners at RUFORUM.

Whilst I appreciate the chance to share my thoughts on the future of agriculture and its skills requirements for our continent – I am also humbled by the challenge, as my intimate knowledge of all the recent advancements in the agricultural higher education sector is really limited and probably influenced by my experiences in South Africa and the SADC region. So whilst I will not ‘take the fifth’ on what I am about to say I do apologize in advance – in case any comments I make are out of context.

Synchronicity – a term originally coined by Carl Jung during his research into the phenomenon of the collective unconscious, has come to mean ‘the simultaneous occurrence of events that appear significantly related but have no discernible causal connection’. The holding of this RUFORUM Biennial Meeting on its 10th year of existence may have been a simple timing matter flowing from the biennial planning cycle; that it is held in Maputo where the African Heads of State adopted CAADP may be a coincidence, furthermore that it is also held during the year that the African Union (AU) has declared and celebrated as the Year of Agriculture and Food Security as part of the celebrations for CAADP at 10 may have been deliberate and if I may humbly add that this is also a year in which I find my way back to the area of my passion – African Agricultural Development – and that in my book – amounts to Synchronicity. Irrespective of how we see the overlap in these reasons, I would like to start by adding my congratulations to the founders of the concept, implementers of the ideas and the beneficiaries of the programmes who are now the inspiration for reflection.



Above: Bongiwe Nomandi Njobe - Executive Director at Tiger Brands Ltd and RUFORUM Board Member

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For those of you who may not know – over 10 years ago – I was one of the (what I now call) African Agricultural Activists who sought to take ownership of our agricultural research agenda frustrated by the seemingly low levels of influence on the content of the existing development partnerships and its impacts as well as the gaps we experienced in successful implementation of agricultural and food security policy within our own countries.

We understood that in the absence of an own shared vision for the future we could not meaningfully engage with the international development partners who were probably frustrated by the concerns for the sustainability of their well meaning efforts. We have since made great strides and it is with pride that I acknowledge the progress and the evolution that has taken place on the CAADP, FARA, RUFORUM and other platforms over the past decade.

At the time we were inspired, maybe angry enough to desire, fight for and define the change we wanted – I guess we were, to quote the words of Mahatma Gandhi that, “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.” This fighting spirit seems to have been the same that led the eight founding members to the formation of Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM). It is on the basis of my historical relationship to the topics under discussion that I will make my remarks.

I discuss four issues which whilst not exhaustive of the topic, if considered in tandem could positively impact on our African Agricultural Development Agenda. I will use a framework for action that I have learnt to use in from my experience over the past ten years of working within two JSE Listed Companies in the Fast Moving Consumer Goods – Food and Beverage Sector in South Africa. I hope at the end of my comments you will be able to consider applying this simple approach to taking RUFORUM forward for the next ten years. I acknowledge that there are vastly different timing horizons in an industry that measures products per second of the production lines and a network of academic institutions that measures output of people, patents and publications that may or may not be produced after several years - but I suggest that in thinking about the next ten years – you will need to know what you want to stop, start, do differently or continue doing as a collective in pursuit of your own pathway to achieving the goals of Agenda 2063.

The African Union vision for our continent is that of: **“An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in global arena.”** In its evolution from the OAU – the AU has focused largely on socio-political, peace and security and governance as its unifying themes and initiatives across the continent. Following on the adoption of the NEPAD Programme in 2001, the AU has been more deliberate in the articulation of the economic, financial and technical platforms for policy, programmes and action. The success of such initiatives is dependent upon the degree to which the intended beneficiaries actually take ownership of those agendas.

“Agenda 2063” is seen as a global strategy to optimize the use of African resources for the benefit of Africans. We repeatedly from Her Excellency Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini – Zuma, and the other representatives from the AU Commission that it is an approach that aims to encourage discussion among all stakeholders, to how the continent should effectively learn from the lessons of the past, build on the progress now underway and

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strategically exploit all possible opportunities available in the immediate and medium term, so as to ensure positive socio-economic transformation within the next 50 years.¹

The first observation I would like to make and to some this may sound like stating the obvious – but it is important to **CONTINUE** to assert and acknowledge the fact that African Agricultural Professionals and Stakeholders are taking charge of the development agenda – indeed it is ours to own.

CAADP at 10 - speaks about – Sustaining The Momentum – I think in the light of the pivotal role that higher education and training plays - more needs to be done. In continuing to assert ‘our way’ I think we should be pushing limits - going beyond that which even we think is impossible. It may sound ridiculous to those of us who are predominantly – ‘left brain’ gurus but the truth is change only truly happens when one moves beyond the comfort zone – and in this case as Agricultural Professionals I believe if we gave space to the creativity and courage that comes from our right brain we can indeed push limits!

I am inspired by the thought expressed by Arthur Charles Clarke – who was a British science fiction writer, science writer, inventor, undersea explorer, and television series host (talk about diverse perspectives) that “The limits of the possible can only be defined by going beyond them into the impossible.” Indeed if we are to be true to the vision of the African Agenda 2063 – we should accept that we do not have the luxury of time to effect meaningful change to our continent and must therefore be bold, do more and heighten our sense of urgency. Even Nelson Mandela confirmed – ‘It always seems impossible until it’s done’ – a credible thought considering that throughout his 27 years of incarceration he maintained his believe in a free and democratic South Africa. Need I say more?

So how does ‘pushing limits beyond the impossible’ apply to the orderly world of higher education in agriculture – where there are established disciplines and rules of engagement?

This is where we need to think about what we need to **STOP** doing. I am sure that for all of us on a regular basis when we pause to reflect on what is important – we know what we need to stop doing in our personal and work lives in order to make our lives more meaningful, achieve greater success in our endeavors and for some of us - how to remove time wasters and – really focus on actions of significance. I suggest in your thinking about RUFORUM’s next ten years – you also start generating a ‘bucket list’ of all the things you are going to stop doing to make RUFORUM a high performance network in all aspects.

In thinking about the most significant concerning aspect about the development of the African Continent I realized, as I am sure you all agree – it is the sense (almost helpless) of the dependency we have on donor support for the activities we really want to do. Underlying this is the fear that if we speak out to change the rules of the game we shall lose our grants, our incomes and the opportunity to network. Bertrand Russell said and I quote ‘To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom’. How true is that? Yet how scary - it is to take the first step.

I would like to suggest another way of thinking that could ultimately enable us to overcome the fear of taking charge of our own destiny even if it makes us fearful of a loss of donor support. In doing so I will digress a little as I will borrow from some of the thinking processes in the private sector.

¹ Cited from the AU Website

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Having run a national government department of agriculture in South Africa for eight years where we all 'fought' for the allocation of budget resources to do our work – I thought I understood what competition for resources was. I had a rude awakening when I joined the private sector and learnt that – whilst in the public sector – budget is what you spend, in the private sector budget is what you generate.

Where I have worked, manufacturing units could count the products per second off the production line, sales departments could tell you in monetary terms what their projections and margins are expected to be and even support functions – largely knowledge based also had to demonstrate the value they bring to the business. In order to generate companywide profits a company therefore needed to draw on its comparative advantage be it systems skills or products and leverage its competitive edge in a market where there were many competing products, diverse consumer preferences, complex supply chains and challenging routes to market.

Business strategists such as Michael Porter have written several books on competitive business strategies that could be adopted in order to gain competitive advantage. A competitive advantage is an advantage over competitors gained by offering consumers greater value, either by means of lower prices or by providing greater benefits and service that justifies higher prices. An over simplification of his generic recommendations suggest a consideration of cost leadership, cost focus, differentiation focus and differentiation leadership depending upon whether they want to operate in a broad or a narrow market segment.

In the context of the RUFORUM, notwithstanding the demand for skills on the continent – and assuming that the provision of higher agricultural education is our 'product' – who is our target market, our consumer and our competitors – and how are we geared to compete?.

Is there not an opportunity in harnessing the power of the collective – the comparative advantage of the network to harmonize standards and systems in order that we can leverage agricultural education offerings across the continent, facilitating differentiation and achieving cost leadership?. At the core should be the expectation that Universities of Agriculture provide relevant, contemporary, quality and accessible programmes that inspire collaboration with industry and attract - especially young people – in the same way other consumer products appeal to our notions of success.

This brings me to the - what we can **DO DIFFERENTLY** challenge. My sense is that if we undertook market research beyond the smallholder farmer and government – to industry expectations of our 'product' we would realise that we have to revolutionize the content of what we focus on.

Traditional agricultural disciplines span across agronomy, animal husbandry, aquaculture and forestry. Historically the orientation of agricultural education has been towards solving problems at the farm level – improving productivity, disease management and so on and so forth. Consequently the application of skills and knowledge has also been largely within the confines of the sector and mainly targeted at the production component of the agricultural value chain. Notably we have heard many positive stories about the results of and impacts of research grants and this is good as a contribution to improved productivity on the continent.

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Currently, many of you in the learning institutions on the continent are worried about funding and the attractiveness of agriculture as a subject area to the youth – the future generations who will be the drive for the attainment of Agenda 2063 and become its custodians.

Riviera² suggests that whilst ‘Universities are often reluctant to base admissions solely on employment prospects and remain faithful to the traditions of academic freedom - for those students whose futures are not targeted toward academia or research institutes, an agricultural entrepreneurial venture or careers in agricultural business might better serve their purposes.’ The question for RUFORUM - I suppose is - how much do we know about what potential agricultural and related studies students want to learn.

Many Universities still try to attract young people to ‘the love of farming’ and I believe the messaging needs to change. At the very least as agricultural education institutions we should claim the broader knowledge applications of agriculture in the diverse areas where it is actually used. Entomology has become a critical discipline in forensics, agronomy feeds into procurement strategies in the food and beverage industries, the biosciences, genomics and bio-photonics are facilitating innovations and animal health knowledge is necessary for having a better grasp on human health and nutrition.

Genetic engineering and here I am emphasizing the science of making changes to the genes of a plant or animal to produce a desired result has evolved out of the pursuit of agricultural research and the quest for improved varieties, has expanded in its application to identifying opportunities in the bio-energy economy, the human health sciences and still continues to do so.

There are many other applications that we can trace and need to claim - and you know them much better than I do but I guess you understand the point I am making about – claiming the space where we know we have impact. In order to do that of course it will require a shift in the orientation of the actual content in the teaching environment.

This brings me to my fourth remark – in the change matrix – namely what should we **START** doing. We must start executing our agreements.

Maya Angelou – a woman who consistently spoke with clarifying wisdom once said ‘If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude.’ I would like to suggest a change in attitude about how we think about this product of ours – higher education in agriculture especially if we want the sector to be in existence in 2063.

Let us start by changing the way in which we conclude our conversations about strategy and vision – rather than end them with an great idea and the reason why it is so – let us simultaneously answer the question of the what – good will be good when it is achieved, who will take responsibility for doing it and by when will it be done.

We can learn a lot about how to do this practically from the principles and practices of project management. Robert Wysocki³ defines a project as ‘a sequence of unique, complex, and connected activities that have one goal or purpose and that must be completed by a specific time, within budget, and according to speci-

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² Cited from Rivera, W.M., (2008) ‘Three Challenges and the Concept of ‘Workforce Education Systems’ published in the Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension Vol. 14, No. 1, 53-68,

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ation.’ Whilst most traditional project planning takes the linear approach to sequencing – it is also possible to consider an Agile, reiterative process – when ‘the goal is clear but the solution is not’ as I believe is often the case when planning in an ever changing socio-economic and political context as could be the case with responding to the Agenda 2063 ambition.

So in by way of conclusion let me reiterate the suggested focus areas with respect to my adopted action matrix.

First of all as we deepen our understanding of the context within which we operate we need to continue to assert our leadership position on the African continent and not allow other sectors or other non-continent based institutions to steal our blooming talent – we have such great potential – our role is to be at the forefront of shaping agricultural higher education that responds to the challenges of Agenda 2063

Secondly – we need to let go of those ‘things’ that are not adding value to our work – it is not for me to list them but I do hope you have started generating your mental bucket list.

As we stop doing those non-value adding and in many cases not so relevant activities we need to change the way in which we see the world and re-create institutions for the future – that I know is a ‘tall ask’ especially since we know – many of us will most likely not be here in 2063.

Finally we need to act and act expeditiously with a heightened sense of urgency and purpose – in an organized manner drawing on our separate and collective capabilities and redefine the role the image of African Agriculture in the minds of the world.

To recap the words of Nelson Mandela ‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.’

I wish you all of the best in fulfilling your mandate. Thank you for your attention.

This was a speech delivered By Bongwiwe Njobe on the 22 July 2014 to the Vice Chancellors and other guests at the RUFORUM Biennial Conference in Maputo, Mozambique.

This is our 11th issue in a series of articles we are releasing as part of our 10 year anniversary. Download by clicking on the following issues to access the previous issues; [Working against career advancement barriers](#) (10th Issue); [Reaping what you sow: agricultural partnerships are key](#) (ninth issue); [Tertiary education: a prerequisite to meet global challenges](#) (eighth issue) [The Role of Networking And Harnessing Innovations In Higher Agricultural Education](#) (seventh issue) [Community Action Research Grants: Connecting Universities to Rural Producers](#) (sixth issue) [RUFORUM Small Competitive Grants; GRGs – Graduate Research Grants](#) (fifth issue) [RUFORUM Network: Changing Pedagogical Paradigms, Priorities, and Practice](#) (fourth issue), [Briefing note on the 4th biennial conference](#) (third issue), [RUFORUM’s Developmental Roots](#) (second issue) and [RUFORUM@10](#) (first issue).

³ Wysocki, Robert K. (2011) Effective Project Management: Traditional, Agile, Extreme, 6th Edition. John Wiley & Sons.

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