

Policy Brief

October, 2011 | ISSN: 2226 - 4256 | No: 0009



A Win-Win Partnership: University and Community Engagement in Agriculture



With support from the
Association of African Universities
through support from DFID



RUFORUM POLICY BRIEF

A Win-Win Partnership: University and Community Engagement in Agriculture



Executive summary

This policy brief demonstrates that universities can play a critical role in supporting agricultural development through re-orientation of the way in which they conduct research and run their educational programmes. Experiences at Bunda College of Agriculture and Makerere University have provided clear evidence of the potential of mutually beneficial University-Community Partnerships. To leverage these partnerships more effectively, governments and development partners might wish to consider the following recommendations

1. Ensure that national higher education regulatory systems for accreditation and quality assurance both make provision for and actively encourage universities to integrate field-based assignments in university curricula.
2. Review funding mechanisms for universities to ensure that finances are available for field-based research and teaching assignments on a continuing basis.
3. Ensure that university stakeholders are part of national planning discussions on agricultural development and are expected to make an ongoing contribution to developing the knowledge base that is required for significant growth of that sector.
4. Consider adopting open licensing frameworks.

Why the need for engagement?

Africa requires bold and innovative agricultural development to help the continent's smallholder farming families to move out of poverty and hunger. In line with the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), this development needs to focus on those farming activities that have the greatest effect on reducing hunger and poverty. Change needs to occur across entire agricultural chains, from improving soil health, crop yields, and access to water, right through to ensuring that farmers are able to realize their productivity gains most effectively and with great-est financial reward in the market. Achieving this objective requires a strong emphasis on developing capacity of all stakeholders across the entire value chain and not just at the farmer level. Along with farmers, community leaders, farmers' cooperatives, extension workers, universities, governments, agribusiness, and non-governmental organizations all need to be involved.

There is growing evidence that universities can play a critical role in supporting agricultural development, although this requires a re-orientation of the way in which they conduct research and run their educational pro-grammes (particularly at the postgraduate level). The approaches need to enable closer ties and ongoing engagement between university faculty and farming communities, to the benefit of both.

Activities documented at Bunda College of Agriculture and at Makerere University's Faculties of Veterinary Science and Agriculture have high-lighted this potential, with important lessons for decision makers.

Emerging lessons from Bunda

A new case study produced by the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) of activities at the Bunda College of Agriculture has demonstrated the value of field-based interaction by university students and academics with communities.

The College's approach to community development is an active attempt to meet the needs of the surrounding community, as well as the country. The formal curriculum integrates community engagement, while the College has dedicated structures to ensure effective community engagement. Projects include a strong research focus to inform interventions and to feed findings back into the curriculum through processes such as the Outreach pro-gramme. Participatory research and actively involving farmers and community members in all projects is considered essential. Student field attachment programmes focus on simple, yet innovative, concepts that meet community needs and have resulted in noticeable impact on those involved. Approaches such as these have tremendous potential for replication if they receive the right sup-port from governments and other key development partners (See Sidebar on 'How University-Community Partnerships Create Mutual Benefit').

'Our students see that they can make an impact... through our students the farmers are talking about their needs... Our students know how to talk to farmers, are able to understand the problems the farmers are facing and are able to come up with solutions together with the farmers'.
(Dr. Daimon Kambewa, Head of Bunda College of Agriculture Department of Extension)

A few success stories

- Through a mandatory field attachment pro-gramme, students under the Bachelor of Science in Nutrition and Food Science became involved in teaching community members about varied uses of soya beans. Whilst soya beans were mainly used for animal feed and for sale in the past, the project has resulted in the community being educated on their nutritional value, and various other uses of soya beans for consumption.

RUFORUM POLICY BRIEF

A Win-Win Partnership: University and Community Engagement in Agriculture



Importantly evidence of changes in behaviour, arising from this training, have been obtained in surrounding communities demonstrating how new ideas communicated to one community are then shared with others.

- Through RUFORUM's Community Action Research Programme (CARP), Bunda College is implementing a project aimed to re-create the optimal breeding environment of Lake Malawi in small inland fish ponds. The project supports Master's and PhD students to complete a research intern-ship, during which students work with, and learn from, smallholder fish farmers and other stake-holders. The students have seen the numbers of fish farmers with whom they are working increasing from just two farmers and 12 fish ponds, to more than 30 farmers and 160 fish ponds. Engagement with farmers has helped to shift the mindset of community members from subsistence to commercial farming, as farmers are trained to manage their fish ponds and their income, which has increased through fish sales. Perhaps the most powerful impact of this is that, within just two years, farmers have seen a visible difference in the quality of their life. Importantly, the findings of the students' research will be disseminated to the 'Outreach' project, which works to review and implement what has been learned during action research projects back to the curriculum.



Mrs. Mwase a fish farmer under the CARP, built herself a new house after realizing increased profits from the sale of fish.



Above left-house before.
Below left-house after.

- Within the Department of Agribusiness, students, staff, and community workers conduct on-campus business projects. Students are given seed capital, and are involved in developing and implementing business plans that target agricultural needs and the needs of stakeholders. Whilst these business projects are student-led, community members are also employed to run the business. A Departmental bank

account, which has both staff and student signatories, assists in monitoring money made through the sale of the business products, and earnings are usually ploughed back into the business.

The Makerere experience

A project at Makerere University's Faculties of Veterinary Science and Agriculture implemented in partnership with the AgShare Initiative (see www.oerafrica.org/agshare/) has been developing a programme to improve production and economic performance of small- to medium-size dairy farms using the resources of the University. The graduate students played a pivotal role in the project: they collected baseline data upon which progress would be measured, implemented the designed interventions, monitored progress, maintained continuous communication between farmers and faculty, and collected relevant case examples for incorporation in teaching modules (including: indicators of poor quality and safety of milk, farm conditions contributing to poor animal health and milk production, conditions contributing to spoilage of milk, poor farm business plans, and limited market information).

The project has shown positive impacts on many of the indicators that were measured. The dairy industry (through its cooperative structures) veterinarians, and extension workers in the area have strongly embraced the programme and all indications are that they will continue implementing its ideas for many years. Likewise, the materials produced will be used in coming years in the relevant Makerere University Master's Degree programmes.

A few key challenges

Of course, there are also challenges in implementing these kinds of approaches. Key challenges include:

- Universities do not have adequate financial re-sources for outreach and community engagement activities, therefore this approach is neither prioritized nor is it part and parcel of most university teaching and research curricula. Similarly, few university staff members are able to create time to supervise students in their attachment.
- Most University outreach and community engagement activities are financed through donor-funded projects and programmes. The challenge with this funding mechanism is that it is short-lived and therefore the benefits in the communities are transitory and rarely sustained over time.
- Securing farmer buy-in to projects is sometimes a challenge. One way in which this challenge is tackled is through 'role models' or early-adopter farmers displaying the benefits of participating to other farmers.

RUFORUM POLICY BRIEF

A Win-Win Partnership: University and Community Engagement in Agriculture



Policy Recommendations

The experiences of Bunda and Makerere have provided clear evidence of the potential of mutually beneficial University Community Partnerships. To leverage these partnerships more effectively, governments and development partners might wish to consider the following recommendations:

Ensure that national higher education regulatory systems for accreditation and quality assurance both make provision for and actively encourage universities to integrate field-based assignments in university curricula. Many of these systems still place undue emphasis on traditional, lecture-based modes of teaching and learning, sometimes actively discouraging innovative approaches such as those described in this Policy Brief.

Review funding mechanisms for universities to ensure that finances are available for field-based re-search and teaching assignments on a continuing basis. Most universities still rely disproportionately on donor funding to implement initiatives such as those described in this brief, which makes them inherently unsustainable. Ideally, such activities should be funded through a combination of government subsidy and student fees. Given that the ability of most African students to pay higher fees is constrained, this requires higher levels of per-capita funding than is currently available.

Ensure that university stakeholders are part of national planning discussions on agricultural development and are expected to make an ongoing contribution to developing the knowledge base that is required for significant growth of that sector. While many universities have tended historically to be like 'ivory towers', this Policy Brief has illustrated that they can play a critical role in generating and sharing the knowledge that is essential to agricultural growth and development. In addition to being invited to participate in national planning for the sector, they should also be required to make this contribution by feeding the results of their engagements with farming communities back into national policy-making and implementation forums. Introduce output based reward systems: universities in the ECSA region will put in systems that recognize achievement at department, programme and individual team level. Outstanding programmes will receive recognition (and access to future resources) for their efforts so as to continuously improve.

How University-Community Partnerships Create Mutual Benefit:

1. *Field-based research activities and student projects enable universities to interact with farming communities.*
2. *Through interaction, farming communities learn new techniques and access valuable information from students and academics.*
3. *Field-based activities provide opportunities for students and academics to generate new knowledge.*
4. *By being in the field, students gain valuable experience that makes them more rounded, competent graduates, who take their competences with them into the workplace, to the potential benefit of the whole agricultural value chain.*
5. *As knowledge gained is captured as research outputs or student assignments, new ideas feed back into university curricula.*
6. *Sharing of these outputs under open licences can enable other stakeholders to tap into products of field-based university work.*
7. *Openly-licensed content can be re-purposed as educational materials for use by universities, NGOs, extension workers, and farming communities.*



A family proudly shows their harvested tomatoes – irrigated using a rope and washer pump, which was developed in collaboration with Bunda College.



The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) is a 19 year old net-work of 29 universities in 17 African Countries. RU-FORUM sees ICT effectively used and integrated into the operations of the member universities .

The Association of African Universities (AAU) is forum for consultation, exchange of information and cooperation among institutions of Higher Education in Africa

