

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

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Celebrating RUFORUM@10

Community Action Research Grants: Connecting Universities to Rural Producers

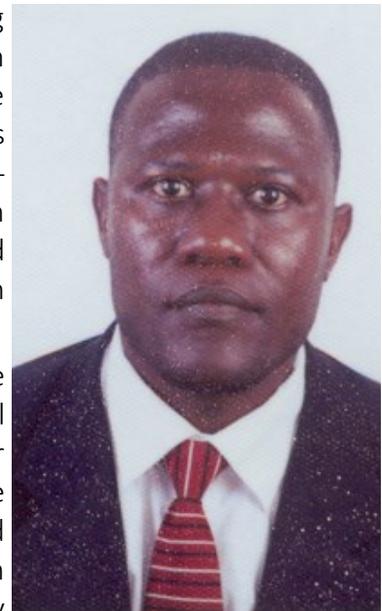
If agricultural transformation is to be a central component in achieving the African Agenda 2063, there needs to be a significant increase in the skills available in rural areas to ensure a radical improvement in the quality and focus of the services supporting the sector. Universities already house a wealth of highly qualified professionals and can produce the research and graduates to fuel sustainable agricultural growth and rural incomes, provided these universities are tasked, and equipped, to respond to actual demand, sharing their knowledge in ways that reach small farmers.

The Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM), through its network of 41 universities in eastern, central and southern Africa, is engaged in linking smallholder farmers and their servicing agencies much more closely with faculty and students. These links are both to enable the farmers to articulate their demands and also to make the ideas, research and skills of the universities available in ways that directly assist the farmers to increase output and profitability in sustainable ways.

In 2010 RUFORUM expanded its Competitive Grants (CGS) programme to incorporate 3 pilot Community Action Research Projects (CARPs). These \$350 000 projects, each led by a professor as the principal investigator (PI), fund a PhD student, 3 M.Sc students and 10 undergraduate students to work with primary producers¹ in a participatory research framework, on a platform that includes other agricultural service agencies². These action platforms are expected to become an integral part of university outreach nationally, and the lessons learned are then shared across all the RUFORUM universities.

¹Including smallholder farmers, fisher-folk, foresters, and also small processors, traders etc

²Relevant service agencies providing inputs, advice, support etc - government, civil society, private sector and international.



Dr. Paul Nampala,
Grants Manager - RUFORUM

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The grants run for 3 years and as the students are finalising their theses, the PIs are expected to use the platforms to ensure ongoing engagement and also to raise other resources to build sustainability. The achievements of these CARPs, even within the current short time frame, have been remarkable. RUFORUM considers this to be a good model for testing and scaling out the skills and knowledge that will help to produce the agricultural surpluses so important to development and achieving the African Agenda 2063.

What have these CARPs achieved?

In Malawi the CARP project was focused on aquaculture, increasing productivity and creating better market linkages. In Kenya the CARP worked very closely with Farmers Associations, responding to their demands and improving productivity, processing and market linkages in maize, millet, cowpeas, and soya. In Uganda where the CARP was established later, they are still in the process of testing a range of outreach approaches including the use of ICT to improve groundnut and soyabean value chains.

The CARPs have delivered tangible benefits to farmers, demonstrating the value of university engagement with communities even in the short term (within 2-3 years). They have successfully tested and scaled out technologies to some 500 farmers directly and to an estimated 10,000 indirectly, with over 2000 having adopted the technologies in Kenya alone. Through the use of Mbilli cropping with fortified manure, IR maize and certified seed, output has more than doubled. The bulking and processing of products has resulted in orders to the Farmers Associations from outside the district which in turn is increasing the area planted. Savings systems are proving popular and the Farmers Associations involved in CARP have already been approached to partner with several micro-credit agencies.

In Malawi fish productivity has more than doubled, market access and prices have increased and selected farmers have been trained to provide high quality fish fry to other farmers.

The CARPs by working closely with farmers compelled technology selection tailored to the specific needs of the farmers who were actively involved with the research. The farmers in Kole, Uganda rejected the sorghum variety that worked well in Bukedea and are now testing varieties more suited to their needs. In Teso, Kenya, farmers reported to the RUFORUM mentoring team that *“Prior to CARP, the University used to come, scoop our soils and never shared with us what they used it for; never gave us the results. Now this “girl” (the PhD research student) tells us everything she is doing and involves us. We realize that we need to work with her research to help us know how to make our soils better.”*

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The CARPs have enhanced the competitiveness of farmers in the value chain – developed the confidence of farmers to compete favorably in markets. They have developed both the technical and soft skills of farmers, students and professors for more effective engagement. The CARPs in Kenya strengthened the farmer associations, who are in turn strengthening individual farmer groups. In Malawi, field days allowed farmer-to-farmer interactions and marketing to grow organically by making the field day coincide with farmer harvest days, resulting in subsequent return buyers of the fish and increased interest in fish farming. In Uganda, while students have not yet completed their research, already one Farmer group leader was training 5 other groups and the demand is growing. In Kenya the farmers associations have through the increased profitability, acquired assets that have improved their services to members and in two, members reported improvements in the management and governance of their organizations as a direct result of the CARPs.

In these Action Research platforms the producers, students, faculty, farmer associations, input suppliers, credit agencies, rural development NGOs, government research, extension agencies and traders are working together along the commodity value chain. This means that the universities are in a better position to scale up successful CARP interventions. In Uganda two leading women and youth NGOs (WOUGNET, P'KWI), and now the Grameen bank are working closely with Makerere University and the farmer groups, forming partnerships that share technical expertise and contribute to sustainability.

Through the CARPs students have acquired skills and a passion for working at the community level, learning to respect small farmers. A student from Malawi indicated that *“Farmers are full of knowledge,*



Above: A fish farmer responding to the RUFORUM team during one of the CARP field visits in Malawi

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wisdom and intelligence” as his greatest learning and said this encouraged him to listen to them and let them take the lead “*by handing-over the ‘stick’*”.

Some reflections

The structure of the CARPs requires students to engage farmers and explain everything from experimental design to value addition and marketing. Farmers actively participate in data collection, and preliminary analysis. They now think about the market before production and better understand the importance of bulking, processing and marketing. The pilot farmers in Kenya called themselves “researchers” and actively shared with other community members what they learned. The CARP communities no longer viewed the university students and professors as “up and above”. The close and honest engagement enabled universities to become more responsive to the specific needs of farmers, and in Malawi, Kenya and Uganda these CARPs have linked universities to stakeholders helping to fast track development. The CARPS in Kenya and Malawi are reaching close to 10,000 producers through demonstrations at community and district shows and field days.

Nonetheless, there remain some challenges for the CARPs – principal among these is how to integrate the platforms and the approach into their university systems. In the next phase, these CARPs will also be required to work more closely with the National Forums³ to provide input and communication at the policy level. RUFORUM is also being challenged by other disciplines and other member universities to establish CARPs for a range of commodities where there are technologies available for testing and scaling out.

In conclusion CARPS provide direct benefits to farmers, develop capacity for increasing agricultural output and livelihoods, and provide opportunities to make the voices of small farmers heard, at national policy levels. Perhaps most importantly, they give students real world experience, developing leaders with the skills and commitment to transform rural areas. CARPs are a valuable vehicle for universities to share their skills and research, and to engage with, and learn from, rural communities.

³RUFORUM is strengthening its National Forums where the member universities interact at the national level with stakeholders in order to establish priorities for research, profiles of graduates and to inform curricula. At the same time these National Forums provide a platform for disseminating technologies and lessons and to influence policies and investments that affect both agricultural higher education and rural development.

This is our sixth 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; [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).

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