



Dr. Judith Ann Francis
RUFORUM International Advisory
Panel Member

RUFORUM proposes four priority responses to the COVID-19 pandemic: Continuously measuring impact of agriculture science, technology and innovation investment on transforming lives and livelihoods of small producers and SMEs in Africa is needed going forward to improve preparedness and responsiveness.

Accept my compliments for the leadership shown by RUFORUM in proposing four priority responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that has brought African countries and more broadly, the entire world to a 'STOP'. See [Link](#). Nations and nationals are calling for action and the requisite resources must be made available/ mobilised as well as the indicators for measuring success agreed on. I shall focus on RUFORUM priority

response 3 "Reimagining higher education post COVID-19" and priority response 4 "Nexus approaches for helping farmers... and transforming agri-food systems." Way back in 2004 we engaged in the multi-lateral, inter-governmental, multi- thematic, multi-sectoral "International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD)". Around the same time, Prof Calestous Juma (now deceased), in his capacity as Chair of the UN Millennium Task Force on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI): Innovation for Development" began paying more attention to our work on mobilising African universities to address STI policy advice. Through our insistence, collective action and convincing arguments, the profile of tertiary education in addressing development challenges was duly recognised in the [final UN STI Millennium report](#). The Task Force called for more dedicated resources for ensuring that young people (and women) could receive higher education. The evidence exists of the strides RUFORUM has made in both these areas.

We followed the IAASTD process closely and when the final and summary reports were published in 2008/2009, African, Caribbean, Pacific (ACP) and EU colleagues deliberated on the findings and recommendations for positioning agricultural knowledge, science and technology at the forefront of agricultural transformation to the year 2050. The IAASTD executive summary of the synthesis report can be accessed through this [Link](#). We also studied the Global Summary Report for Decision Makers. See [Link](#) in depth and it is worth noting that 16 of the 58 countries, whose governments approved this report, are African. If you quickly review it, you will note that all 22 key findings are still relevant today as we grapple with COVID-19. Key finding No. 8 outlined below supports RUFORUM COVID-19 response:

RUFORUM THOUGHT PIECE ON COVID-19

“Strengthening and redirecting the generation and delivery of agricultural knowledge science and technology will contribute to reducing the risk of conflicts... assisting individuals and communities in coping with endemic and epidemic human and animal diseases and their consequences...”. See [Link](#)

As usual, I applaud RUFORUM for the clarity of vision and expect much from the network. However, we still face an uphill battle in enhancing (strengthening) the science, policy and society interface to enable organisations, institutions and countries to comprehensively address current and future agricultural challenges (including the financial viability and sustainability of small-scale farming) as well as win public confidence. Creating opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship that benefit small producers and small and medium enterprises are not sufficiently concretised, resourced and effected to have the desired impact.

The IAASTD process has shown that after having mobilised over 400 international experts more than 15 years ago and building in mechanisms for ensuring ownership of proposed options for action by different stakeholders as well as getting government approval (16 African countries), we were all unprepared for preventing or minimising the negative socio-economic effects of yet another crisis; this time COVID-19. Innovation is a continuous process and so too building science and technology capacity for providing timely STI policy advice.

My hope is that RUFORUM and partners will be able to act expeditiously and in harmony with governments and society to implement priority actions (e.g. modernise laboratories and reduce the cost of bandwidth) that can sustainably build capacity and resilience. If we fail to act effectively, we may face yet another crisis that requires us to ‘dust off earlier proposals for action’ to determine and perhaps discover that they are still relevant. This should be avoided at all costs. Consistency in funding research and infrastructural development such as IT are prerequisites for innovation in higher education, strengthening the interface between science, policy and society and ensuring responsiveness for predicting as well as minimising negative impact of future crises. Let’s ensure that our STI investments will have the desired impact on transforming agrifood systems that benefit small producers.

This is our second 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.agna@ruforum.org

About the Author:

Since September 2003, Judith Ann Francis, a national of Trinidad and Tobago has held the position of Senior Programme Coordinator, Science and Technology Policy at the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA), The Netherlands. Prior to joining CTA, Judith worked with the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), and the Caribbean Industrial Research Institute (CARIRI). She has also lectured at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in food science and nutrition at the University of the West Indies St Augustine Campus. Judith also wears several hats including Chair, of the Tropical Agricultural Platform (TAP) and member of the International Advisory Panel at the BecA-ILRI Hub. Since 2017, Judith has been leading a multi-country project “Promoting Nutritious Food Systems in Pacific Island States ([Innov4AgPacific](#)) which is co-funded by CTA and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). She has also served as a member of the International Advisory Panel for the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) and Executive Secretary of the European Forum for Agricultural Research for Development. Over the years, Judith has championed the innovation systems approach, increasing investments in science, technology and innovation (STI), building capacity of young professionals and women in science, and strengthening inter-and intra-regional as well as EU-ACP science, technology and innovation cooperation for agricultural transformation, rural development (ARD) and improving nutrition outcomes in the 79 African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States as well as for addressing global challenges, specifically food and nutrition security. She has also participated in EU-Africa research funded projects and edited and authored several publications. Noteworthy is the [book](#) on Innovation systems. She is also a past president of the Caribbean Association of Nutritionists and Dietitians and the Caribbean Association of Food Science & Technology and in her early career conducted research to assess the nutritional value of tropical crops including fruits and extending the shelf-life of indigenous food products as well as improving the quality of school meals.