

Endowing African Universities—Cultivating Sustainability

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Endowments are one of the major resource bases for higher education institutions in the United States. An endowment is made up of monetary donations to the institutions from which it draws regular interest proceeds. Numerous institutions maintain extensive networks to boost their endowment holdings. Harvard University currently enjoys the biggest endowment—worth \$15 billion. Other prestigious U.S. institutions—such as Yale, Princeton, and Stanford—have amassed \$7, \$5, and, \$4.5 billion, respectively. Boston College, one of the premier Jesuit institutions, recently successfully completed a \$1 billion endowment drive.

It is certainly the affluence of the society, its unique tax system, the culture of charitable donation, and the recent strength of the economy that continue to drive the expansion of philanthropic initiatives in the United States. The leaders of American higher education institutions anticipate that when the economic frenzy and boom come to an end—they will have expanded their financial base to last them through the difficult times that may lie ahead.

The main purpose of this prologue is not simply to underscore the significance of this unique means of generating resources for higher learning institutions but also to suggest how this innovative method might be emulated, expanded, improvised, and adapted in a different context, situation, and environment such as Africa and the Third World in general.

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The serious financial hardships with which most African higher learning institutions must constantly contend have been thoroughly documented. Except for a very few institutions, such as the University of Botswana,

most of them suffer from serious shortages of skilled personnel and of financial, technical, and material resources. Of course, the state of higher learning institutions generally reflects the economic state of the country in which they exist. This is particularly so in Africa, where almost all higher education institutions are publicly owned and heavily subsidized by the respective governments—rendering them virtually and immediately susceptible to economic exigencies.

The pressure on African governments to expand tertiary education is constantly mounting, as higher learning becomes increasingly critical to social mobility. This has forced governments to expand existing institutions and to establish brand-new ones. It is common knowledge that these expansions often come at the expense of quality, with negative impacts on the entire higher education community—students, faculty, staff, and administrators—and on the nation as a whole.

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Higher education reforms with respect to finance have been particularly difficult and sensitive in Africa. Policies to change existing financial arrangements have been fiercely resisted, forcing governments to maintain the status quo and to struggle with the heavy burden of financing higher education. It should be emphasized that a plethora of external agencies do participate in supporting these institutions through their various programs. Of the cocktail of initiatives by external agencies to support African universities, endowment has been the least contemplated or implemented. At a recent international conference on brain drain and capacity building in Africa, I drew attention to the idea of endowing African universities and other major scholarly centers. The approach was warmly received by the conferees. Is it, then, possible to cultivate a culture of endowing higher learning institutions on African soil? And, if so, how?

How can a university or other major research institution kick-start an endowment initiative? A remarkable statistic may provide some background for this discussion: more than 70 percent of research and development resources in Africa are generated externally. Some regional institutions established as centers of excellence that rely very heavily on these resources have been petitioning for

better, more reliable, and consistent resources and support to improve their effectiveness and cultivate sustainability.

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As a first step, they might do well to approach their historical supporters. To be sure, many critics of Western aid policies may retain their reservations about an initiative that still depends on the institutions themselves. The donor community may reorient its focus by cultivating sustainability to bring about lasting development in these countries in general and higher institutions in particular.

African institutions should emulate U.S. institutions, which continuously expand their endowments by generating donations from corporations, foundations, governments, and individuals. It is an opportune time for Africa to move in this direction—given the current emphasis on the need for a highly trained labor force in the new knowledge and information era and the favorable attitude toward Third World tertiary education.

The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, rarely provides general institutional support in the form of funding endowments or building and operating expenses. However, with the major foundations now reorienting their policies and resources to address the plight of African universities, the climate would seem right for a major endowment drive. It is hoped that the large donation, of more than U.S.\$100 million, recently made by four major U.S. foundations—the Carnegie Corporation and the Ford, Rockefeller, and MacArthur Foundations—to improve African universities, will promote sustainability, by endowing a number of major regional centers, national universities, and programs.

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Endowing African universities by means of funding from external or locally based sources may appear an audacious initiative. It may look futile to consider such long-term strategies

for institutions that struggle just to make it through each day. Nevertheless, it should be feasible to convince philanthropists, governments, and individuals to invest in sustainable initiatives. Locally and externally based affluent nationals should not be neglected in this endeavor. The conviction displayed by an Ethiopian business tycoon in establishing a 40 million Birr (equivalent to U.S.\$5 million) endowment for a college may appear the exception rather than the rule; but several such exceptions are bound to make a difference.

Initiatives to reinvigorate African higher learning institutions—spearheaded by major and powerful education think tanks and financial and philanthropic institutions—have recently gathered momentum. It is up to the leadership of African universities and their respective governments to capitalize on this momentum by means of effective policies and pragmatic measures. It will be unfortunate if Africa fails—*again*—to capitalize on this possibility: not only to rebuild its declining institutions but also to guarantee a better and sustainable future for them. ■

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