

The Call of Africa

A New View and New Opportunity

Billions of aid dollars have poured into Africa. Dombisa Moyo in her book “Dead Aid” has documented graphically that in spite of this, over the past few decades, the poverty levels of Africa have remained unchanged. She challenges the developed world to approach the developing world of Africa with a very different approach and to help them build the capacity to do what they know needs to be done. Empowering the people and institutions of Africa is necessary. Money alone has not brought prosperity to Africa, in spite of its rich resources and its talented people.

There are investments, though, that can help put Africa on the road to prosperity and a better life for all. One such investment is to invest in higher education to help to break the vicious cycle by empowering African countries in the era of the knowledge economy. If Africa is to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), higher education and research are necessary. Fostering knowledge in Africa, about Africa is the way to develop and inspire the next generation of professionals, faculty, students, researchers and leaders.

Painful lessons have taught us that innovation is a necessary part of the path to success in the knowledge economy of the 21st century. From Asia to Europe to North America, governments and institutions are investing heavily in research and development to boost their competitiveness and productivity. In Africa, however, there has been little capacity to educate and train the professionals and the knowledge leaders that are needed to help build Africa’s competitiveness and productivity and to focus on problems and opportunities in their own societies. The result is that Africans must look for higher education and career opportunities in other places, far away from home.

Cheick Sidi Diarra, undersecretary general of the United Nations, reported for example that there are 30,000 PhD holders from Sub-Saharan Africa living outside the continent. There are more Malawian

physicians in Manchester alone than there are in all of Malawi, he adds.

African universities need to be empowered to attract back and retain those who will develop the education and research programs needed at home to build their economies. These faculty members and experts will nurture the next generation of leaders. They will develop the coming generation of Africans who will be the health workers, the economists and political scientists, the scientists and engineers, the innovators and the teachers.

In the past year, an international steering committee of eminent people around the world has helped shape an Academic Chairs for Africa (ACA) proposal to create and fund 1,000 research chairs. A network of scholars and university presidents would connect across divides and disciplines, and collaborate to overcome common challenges and share experiences.

It is time to start with a new approach. Africa is quite capable of setting its own priorities and understands the MDGs. . Rather than the developed world telling the universities what should be done, it is time to ask the universities to establish their own priorities and then help to create the capacity to recruit the qualified faculty they need to build their own excellence foci.

The process would be managed by an international foundation with African partners in governments, in universities, in businesses and in foundations. There would be continual assessments and renewal of funding would depend entirely on quantifiable results. Each chair would have a cross-appointment with a university in the developed world and would serve as a conduit for the exchange of ideas and knowledge. By building capacities in these institutions within Africa, institutions in the developed world will find willing and capable partners who can themselves take the lead.

The proposal is modeled after the Canada Research Chairs program. This was a federally program that funded 2000 chairs to be held at universities in Canada. This has been incredibly successful in attracting and retaining the best younger and more senior researchers, establishing a network of expertise across the country that has built capacity, fueled innovation and boosted competitiveness.

Influential groups and individuals have endorsed the concept, including the Academy of Sciences for the Developing World, the

Network of African Science Academies (there are now a number of Academies of Science in African countries) and the G8 Academies of Science. Senior officers at the United Nations, UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank and the African Development Bank are advisers to the project. And many universities both within and beyond Africa are supportive as well as associations of universities such as the Association of African Universities. Many senior people in governments both in the developed world and the developing world have expressed support and advice on how the proposal would work.

The ultimate appeal of the proposal is the fact that it requires a modest level of funding — \$100,000 US annually for each chair. We call on G20/G8 countries to endorse and support the program for five years. The investment is a small one, but the potential returns could be extraordinary. This new view, new initiative could provide the impetus necessary to unleash the enormous potential of many young Africans and help African countries to reach the U.N. Millennium Development Goals.

Musician and celebrity activist Bono was right on target when he said, “Every era has its defining struggle and the fate of Africa is ours.” We the signatories of this article call on the G20/G8 countries to help overcome this struggle and embrace this opportunity. The Academic Chairs for Africa program is a global grand challenge that will help to reverse Africa’s brain drain, to empower African individuals and institutions. Imagine the impact five years from now of 1000 outstanding faculty members and researchers and their teams of students addressing the needs of their own continent and inspiring others.

It is our opportunity to help answer the call of Africa.

Signers of

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Heitor Gurgulino da Sousa, former rector University of Sao Carlos, Brazil; former rector of United Nations University, Japan

Guido Declercq, honorary general administrator, KU Leuven University, Belgium

Sir David King, Smith School, Oxford and former chief scientist, UK

Michael Adams, president Fairleigh Dickenson University, US

Juma Calestous, Kennedy School of Government , Harvard University

Sir Martin Rees, president of the Royal Society, UK

John Wood, Secretary General, Association of Commonwealth Universities

Shuzaburo Takeda, founding director, Business University forum of Japan

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