

INTRODUCTION

Thomas S. Jayne and Jamie Monson

BACKGROUND

Since early in their post-independence histories, almost all African countries have addressed their most pressing developmental challenges through collaborations involving African governments, African universities, the private sector, civil society, donor/financial organizations, and international technical partners (universities, research institutes, and program implementation organizations). These organizations interact within an ecosystem influenced by funding patterns, power relations, and the individual goals and objectives of the participants involved. Our premise is that prevailing development-oriented ecosystems are not optimal and that changes in the way that these partnerships are structured can lead to more sustainable and mutually beneficial forms of collaboration and more effective outcomes for society. The Alliance for African Partnership has invited a number of people who we regard as thought leaders on this topic to present their perspectives and reflections in this volume, stimulate discussion, solicit feedback, and collectively encourage more effective forms of partnerships.

THE ALLIANCE FOR AFRICAN PARTNERSHIP

Michigan State University, in consultation with 14 African development thinkers representing a range of African organizations and fields of study, initiated the Alliance for African Partnership at a convening held at MSU in May 2016. The purpose of the Alliance is to promote sustainable, effective, and equitable partnerships between African organizations, MSU and other international organizations to address mutually defined challenges facing Africa and the world. Six highly interrelated thematic issues have been identified: (i) the transformation of African agri-food systems; (ii) water, energy and the environment; (iii) youth empowerment; (iv) education; (v) culture; and (vi) health and nutrition, among others. Three pillars also emerged from the convening: (i) Building Bridges, (ii) Transforming Institutions, and (iii) Transforming Lives.

The Alliance is a work in progress. Its activities will surely evolve over time as we learn what works well and what doesn't, widen our network of collaborators, and become more sensitized to their

MISSION

Bring about positive change in Africa through meaningful, equitable partnerships.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Accountability
Equity
Inclusivity
Sustainability
Transparency

PRIORITY AREAS



Agri-food systems



Culture



Education



Health & Nutrition



Youth Empowerment



Water, Energy, & Environment

perspectives and experience. At the core of the Alliance is its vision that “partnership”—the process of defining and implementing the collaboration—is a crucial and under-appreciated determinant of the success of any project, perhaps much more so than the technical know-how of the parties involved or the amount of funding devoted to addressing the challenge. This is why the term “partnership” is featured in the initiative’s title.

MOTIVATION

Africa will soon have more than 20 percent of the world’s population but it contributes less than one percent of published research output. Policies and programs that respond to the region’s unique challenges will require the context-specific knowledge and perspective that African researchers bring to the table. An effective partnership model will need to recognize the dramatic changes in the African landscape during the past few decades with respect to partnerships. Development models premised on 1980s conditions and assumptions do not fit 2017 realities. There is now more awareness and recognition of local knowledge. Many more Africans are highly trained and in a position to

operate effectively given their superior knowledge of local culture and connections with centers of local and global power. They’re capable of influencing government investments and mobilizing community engagement. An effective strategy toward improving the ecosystem of partnerships must directly engage more African professionals than in the past. Collaborations based on the idea that one organization is the capacity builder and the others are recipients legitimize an unequal balance of power that is increasingly inappropriate for today’s realities. Our premise is that partnerships are more likely to be effective if planned together from the inception as equals, establishing a sense of co-ownership, recognizing what each partner has to contribute. Yes, there may be differences in the strengths of the parties involved and resources that each can contribute, but it is these relative strengths and weaknesses that provide the basis for comparative advantages in partnership arrangements. None of that need prevent partnerships from being mutually developed (e.g., objectives, terms of reference, budgets, research publications, development of work plans) and implemented together from the beginning.

OUR APPROACH

Building Bridges



Bringing people and organizations together to work toward common goals.

Transforming Institutions



Guiding institutions toward sustainable partnerships, enhanced resources, and increased capacity.

Transforming Lives



Turning research into real-world impact that improves African lives and livelihoods.

Our motivation is to test these premises through the promotion of a new set of partnership activities in Africa and/or involving African and international collaborators, obtain data on the effectiveness of the approach, guide wider practice in the region regarding how partnerships are implemented, and ultimately to promote a more effective ecosystem for addressing the region's challenges.

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THE HOW

The land-grant university system in the United States provides a potentially appropriate (and certainly not exclusive) model for today's Africa. "Land-grant" universities were initiated in 1862 to address in practical ways the major challenges being faced by societies. At that time, given that over half of the United States population was engaged in farming or food value chains, land-grant universities focused on helping farmers, providing extension services, undertaking research to generate new varieties and more productive farming practices, supporting science and engineering with applied uses, as well as the more traditional humanities and liberal arts.

The practical extension of land-grant university concepts to Africa is obvious and aligns directly with ideas like the "developmental university" model that guided many African universities in their early development. The majority of Africa's population are engaged in farming and rely on food systems. It is widely understood that the transformation of agri-food systems in Africa will be required to achieve widely shared improvements in living standards. But the interrelated nature of food, water, environmental, health, demographic change, educational and social

challenges is increasingly obvious. Land-grant missions also recognize the interdisciplinary nature of the challenges presented. As stated by Thomas Friedman (2008), "how we address the interwoven global trends of climate change, globalization, and population growth will determine a lot about the quality of life on Earth in the twenty-first century." We have a better understanding today how an interdisciplinary and broadly focused approach is often more likely to provide a more effective long-run approach to properly understanding these broader systems and effectively responding to these challenges.

As an international and now "world-grant" institution of higher learning, Michigan State University is asking itself how international public universities can align themselves to effectively face the demands of an increasingly globalized society. "These questions have gained increased urgency in the twenty-first century—for all universities but, in particular, for the nation's land-grant universities...Integrating the attributes and strengths of all segments of society for the sustainable prosperity and well-being of peoples and nations throughout the world is a moral imperative we are called upon to share and lead" (Simon, 2009).

Effective partnerships are certainly going to be at the heart of effective responses to global and local challenges. And in Africa, in particular, more effective modes of partnership will be crucial. The contributions contained in this volume are intended to provide grist for discussion on these important issues.

More about the mission, guiding principles and initial activities of the AAP can be found at:
aap.isp.msu.edu