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inadequate investment cripples higher education... and stunts Africa's development prospects

Harare - A 2010 World Bank report on funding for higher education in Africa indicates a huge mismatch between the student population and investment in the sector.

According to the report, between 1991 and 2006, the number of students in higher education in Africa rose from 2.7 million to 9.3 million.

This is an annual increase of about 16 percent. At the same time, public resources for higher education grew just six percent.

Over the same period, public investment in higher education has remained about 20 percent of education sector budgets, indicating a huge difference between resources allocated to basic and tertiary education.

The World Bank report concludes: "In most Sub-Saharan African countries, enrolment in higher education has grown faster than financing capabilities, reaching a critical stage where the lack of resources has led to a severe decline in the quality of instruction and in the capacity to reorient focus and to innovate."

The result has been "a trade-off that often occurs at the expense of quality and particularly at the expense of expenditure on wages".

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"Universities are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain teaching staff, lecture halls are overcrowded, buildings are falling into disrepair, teaching equipment is not replenished, investment in research and training for new teachers is insufficient and many teachers must supplement their incomes by providing services to the private sector," the report reads.

In the past 10 years, most universities in Africa have experienced unrest in one form or the other; from students striking over increases in tuition fees, or from teaching staff over salaries and benefits.

Resultantly, most institutions have experienced massive brain drain with some programmes - as in the case of the University of Zimbabwe - being suspended due to lack of teaching staff and learning materials.

The World Bank report says increasing tuition fees could be one way of solving the problem, although politically it is problematic as it may lead to riots like what happened in France and Britain in 2008 and 2011, respectively.

World Bank Carnage

However, Professor Mahmood Mamdani, an alumnus of Makerere University and the Director of the Makerere Institute of Social Research, has blamed the World Bank itself for misadvising African governments to shift attention to basic education at the expense of tertiary education.

Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which were foisted on Third World countries in the 1980s and 1990s by the World Bank and the IMF, de-emphasised the importance of tertiary education.

Most developing country governments were at the time trying to provide free basic education.

When multilateral lending institutions and donors indicated aid would not be forthcoming if money continued going to tertiary and free basic education, Third World administrations caved in.

In a lecture at Makerere University earlier this year, Prof Mamdani attributed Makerere University's woes and fading glory to the World Bank's ill-fated SAPs positions on education.

He said the policy did not only kill higher education, but also murdered the quality of primary education too.

"The World Bank convinced the government (of Uganda) that university education was not only elitist but a luxury that society could not afford...

"The logic was elegant but populist and faulty. It has had disastrous consequences for higher education, not just in Uganda but wherever it has been applied in Africa."

Mamdani said the primary school system could not thrive without a flourishing university system.

"Who would train administrators and teachers for primary schools? Who would design the curriculum? The answer to both questions is: universities ...

"It is nonsensical to think that the benefit of higher education goes only or even mainly to those who teach, work or study there.

"It is like saying that the benefit of a power dam goes only to the management and the workers in the dam, ignoring the millions whose workplaces and houses, offices and streets, are lit by that power."

Mamdani added that the World Bank should pay for its sins by funding those

universities badly affected by SAPs.

"The World Bank claims to be a champion of the free market. Well, the first law of the market is that if you make a bad investment, you must pay for it.

"But the Bank has a long history of making bad investments, yet it has never paid the cost of even one wrong decision. It has simply withdrawn and left its clients to pay the bill. The Bank has the luxury of not living by the rules it forces on others."

Former Ugandan Prime Minister, Prof Apollo Nsibambi, in response to Mamdani, conceded that governments had been forced into accepting harmful education policies because they wanted money from the West.

"When the World Bank came up with the policy, Uganda produced a defiant budget in 1987. The Bank then denied us credit. President (Yoweri) Museveni had to tactfully accept the SAPs because he was managing an ailing economy," Prof Nsibambi said.

Where Are Africa's Philanthropists?

But the problem is not just with the World Bank. According to a January 2007 report by the National Association of Colleges and Universities Business Officers, the top 765 US colleges and universities had a combined US\$340 billion in endowment assets as of 2006 - with the largest being Harvard with US\$29b.

Harvard's endowment alone is larger than the national budgets of most African countries.

An endowment includes money and/or properties donated to an institution as a public charity, private foundation or trust.

These endowments have been used to sponsor research, support specific students, and sponsor chairs or professorships.

Endowments are integral to the financial health of these institutions and in many cases, they come from alumni.

In contrast, African institutions get most of their donations from Western donors who want the money to fund programmes that may not directly benefit or contribute to local development.

So why are former students not giving back to the institutions that have set them on the path to professional and financial success?

Further, governments have been accused of failing to prioritise education – both basic and higher – while concentrating on budgetary aspects that have quicker returns and thus greater political mileage in the immediate term.

In an interview with The Southern Times, Zimbabwe's Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education and renowned historian, Dr Stan Mudenge, said the culture of philanthropy was lacking in most African institutions.

"Most if not all African countries suffer from severe budgetary constraints, making it difficult for governments to prioritise higher education in place of such issues as health and food security.

"This has resulted in a decline in budgetary allocations to higher and tertiary education despite its importance in research and development that is necessary for a country's development.

"In developed countries, however, apart from government support, institutions of higher learning also have strong ties with industry, while a number of trusts or foundations pour in large sums of money every year," he said.

The minister said what was important was to encourage Africans to support their institutions.

"The solution is for local companies to support our institutions. This also requires governments to offer, for example, tax incentives. Ultimately, that is where a long-term solution lies.

"Universities and research institutions and industry should have symbiotic relations that allow benefits to all parties."

Recently, Zimbabwe's Deputy Prime Minister, Prof Arthur Mutambara, launched a fundraising initiative to raise at least US\$70m for the University of Zimbabwe's capital projects.

He hopes the initiative will become an ongoing process meant to instil a sense of philanthropy.

"What we want is for us to think of that clinic we were born in; that primary school or secondary school that you attended.

"These institutions provided us with the foundations and success that we enjoy today, so we should give back to ensure that future generations also benefit.

"We have the capacity but sometimes we just do not realise it. It is not a matter of pouring millions but using the different expertise and knowledge that we have to assist the institutions that shaped us to what we are today," he said.

South African researcher, Linda Nordling, who specialises in African science policy, education and development, has noted that Stellenbosch University (SU) has attracted record investment from external sources amid the global economic downturn - showing what is possible with the right plan and good leadership.

In April this year, Russel Botman, the rector at SU, announced that the university had raised R2 billion as part of its HOPE project that addresses Africa's development priorities.

Fourteen people gave more than R1m each in addition to 2 464 other individual donors.

Nordling said, "A rise in science philanthropy, coupled with healthy economic growth in many African countries means there is money for enterprising institutions to tap into.

"But to follow in SU's footsteps, African universities must change. They must hire leaders with proven academic and fundraising talent and must draw up plans to guide investments in their institutions."

Nordling said it was also important for African governments to allow universities greater freedom to engage stakeholders and appoint competent people to occupy critical positions to spearhead fundraising.

Tafadzwa Musarara, chairperson of Zimbabwean pressure group Resource Watch, said the problem was that most companies in Africa were foreign-owned and thus had no impetus to fund universities. "If we had control of our companies it would be better to then approach those institutions to fund our institutions.