

The African Development Bank Group



THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

“The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal
Change and Development”

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Round Table Session

***PROMOTING EXCELLENCE TO ACCELERATE AFRICA’S
DEVELOPMENT: TOWARDS AN AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION
AND RESEARCH AREA***

STATEMENT

BY

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Your Excellency President of Republic of Slovenia
Your Excellency Director-General of UNESCO,
Your Excellency Prime Minister of Namibia,
Your Excellency Mrs Biden,
Ministers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues.

It gives me real pleasure to address you today, not only because of the Bank's interest in higher education, but also because of my personal interest in the subject, having spent over ten years as a university professor, let me add, some of the richest years in my life. But let me go straight into my remarks.

Allow me to begin with a few facts about Africa. The reason I am citing these facts is that I believe although they appear obvious they should be determinant in any strategy for developing Africa's higher education sector. The facts are the following:

- Africa is made up of 53 countries, some of them quite small in both population and geographical area. Many are landlocked;
- It has the largest youth population in the world, a significant "youth bulge," as it is now called;

- Most African countries are not likely to attain the MDGs. And here, I am not only referring to the education goals;
- Agriculture remains the main source of livelihood for most of the African population, but it has not been a source of growth for African economies. In fact, most recent growth has had as its source natural resources extraction. African agriculture, despite tremendous potential, remains technologically undeveloped accompanied by low levels of productivity;
- Many countries are just emerging from situations of fragility and conflict; problems of governance persist;
- Recent food and financial crisis have hit the African continent quite hard, leading to large numbers of people falling back below the poverty line.

Now let me cite a few facts about Africa's higher education:

- As funding for public higher education has declined over the years, private higher education has mushroomed at a great pace. Serious problems of access however, continue to persist;
- Most donor funding for education has gone to the basic education sub-sector;

- Only one African country has any significant contribution to the top 500 universities list worldwide, namely South Africa;
- The continent has seen some impressive progress in ICTs.

As I said in the beginning, all of these facts must be taken into account in any sustainable strategy of assistance for African higher education. Following are some of the elements of such a strategy which I believe are crucial and around which partners and stakeholders should rally:

- It is clear that funding of higher education can depend neither on public nor private sources alone. While higher education remains a public good, private financing is imperative. In order to ensure, however, that private financing of higher education does not become a purely commercial endeavor, as is the case in many African countries today, strong regulation and quality control is a strict necessity;
- Planning for higher education must take place at the continental level. In fact, I am encouraged by some of the bold decisions of the recent African Union Summit on the necessity of harmonizing political decision-making systems must converge, allowing greater continental mobility;

- In the same vein, African higher education must be transformed into an instrument of regional integration. This means that not every one of Africa's 53 countries needs its own university with the full range of expertise and specializations. Regional centers of excellence must be encouraged;
- Related to the above, partnership and cooperation across the continent must be encouraged. Those countries that have more developed higher education systems must share their best practices with other less developed ones. Only thus can truly African higher education space be created and nurtured;
- Two areas of expertise are crucial for the diversification of African economies, yet they are not receiving the required attention. These are agriculture and natural resource extraction. A focus on these two areas in higher education can contribute to ensuring the competitiveness of African economies;
- The relationship between higher education and the labor market must be reinforced, even if incentives are to be given to encourage students to go into certain specializations required by the labor market. This also means that there has to be a diversification in the levels and types of higher education institutions that can cater for the needs of the large youth population;

- Recent successes in ICT in Africa thanks to vibrant private investments must be seized and built upon to ensure wider access. Several pilot projects already exist. These need to be scaled up;
- Allow me to mention one last part of this strategy, which is usually forgotten. Higher education must become the breeding ground of academic freedom and good governance. It must encourage free expression and openness and dialogue. Let me remind you that many of our African universities in the past played this important role. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. So let me emphasize once again the importance of African higher education in developing a true African voice on both African and global development issues.

Finally, permit me to say a few words about what the African Development Bank is doing in higher education. The Bank has taken a strategic decision to focus to a large extent in contrast to many other donors on higher education. The Bank approved its *Higher Education, Science and Technology Strategy* in 2008. This strategy offers a framework for interventions in the following three major areas: (i) the establishment of centers of excellence; (ii) the creation of adequate infrastructure, including construction, rehabilitation and supply of equipment for higher education, science and technology; and (iii) the strengthening of linkages between institutions of higher learning and research and the productive sectors.

This strategy tries to partially respond to the above elements. We remain ready to assist partner countries in developing their own strategies and providing resources for their implementation.

Thank you for your kind attention.