Reconnecting African universities to sustainable development

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Abstract: To a significant extent, Africa's lapses towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) *vis-à-vis* the reverses in strategic initiatives for growth and development are deeply intertwined with the broader question of how the continent's university sector is evolving as a complementary sector in accelerating progress and the larger implications for Sustainable Development (SD). For some time now, there is a strong emerging opinion that African universities are severely losing capacities in terms of intellectual capital growth and sustainability and promoting skills-led curricula and lifelong learning, all of which are integral to SD discourses. Consequently, this paper addresses a range of questions: Are universities, as institutional stake holders or repositories of knowledge and human capacity development, in the contemporary discourse of Africa's development? Are African universities relevant in this discourse? What should be the universities' role in or contribution to advancing the discourse? What should constitute the agenda and focus? How should the universities' performance be evaluated in relation to progressing the ideals of SD? This paper addresses these questions by examining the knowledge-for-development provisioning capability of African universities within the context of the MDGs' realisation (and SD) and suggests target areas for reform emphasis.

1 Introduction

> "Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe." (HG Wells, cited in IBRD/World Bank, 2000)

With the formal adoption of the Millennium Declaration in 2000 (United Nations, 2002) and the consequent Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the turn of the century seemed a period of great promise for world development. For Africa, the effective pursuit and achievement of the MDGs would have meant a 'great leap forward' in reducing the debilitating poverty and other sources of human deprivation and promoting sustainable development. As often the case with other multilateral development programmes (*e.g.*, structural adjustment programmes, SAP, of the 1980s), implementation failures have become a resultant common denominator. For example, the Global Monitoring Report

published by the World Bank and IMF in July (from 2004 to 2008) consistently provides a sobering assessment of progress towards MDGs. On current trends, Africa will fail to achieve most of the MDGs, SSA being seriously off-track. The questions now being asked in public policy circles and research communities are: what can be done, from 'within', to ameliorate the situation? How might Africa's home-grown institutions be re-oriented and re-aligned to effectively engage the realities of the region's 'arrested development'? Without any shadow of doubt, Africa faces a future of increasing poverty, human deprivation and global economic exclusion unless it is able to strategically harness and leverage the skills needed for the twenty-first century and thus strengthen its position to compete effectively in the knowledge economy. Not long ago, Gillis (1999, quoted in IBRD/World Bank, 2000) poignantly asserted that "today, more than ever before in human history, the wealth – or poverty – of nations depends on the quality of higher education". This applies with particular force to Africa and the challenge is well understood by Africans, albeit at a philosophical or desperately helpless level. For example, one of Africa's leaders, in a submission to the Task Force on Higher Education and Society (IBRD/World Bank, 2000) expressed grave concerns that higher education in Africa is becoming increasingly obsolete which, in part, is why development programmes are stultified even from the outset. Therefore, African universities must confront the 'new realities' evident in the environments in which they operate.

Universities embody multidimensional logics. There is a clear technical logic in the production and diffusion of knowledge but institutional and socio-economic logics are taking a new relevance in developing a holistic view of what a modern university should be. For some time now, there is a strongly emerging opinion that African universities are severely loosing capacities in terms of intellectual capital growth and sustainability, promoting skills-led curriculum and life-long learning, all of which are integral to sustainable development discourses. Consequently, reconnecting Africa's university sector to the sustainable development discourse inevitably raises a range of questions such as those addressed by IBRD/World Bank (2000), *viz.*:

- What is the role of Africa's university sector in supporting and enhancing the process of economic and social development in the region?
- What are the major obstacles that universities face in Africa?
- Are there governmental components to these? If so what?
- Are there societal components to these? If so what?
- How can these obstacles best be overcome?

2 The university as an agent of development

Ever since the beginning of modern science, knowledge has been sought from the university on 'the nature of nature'; how nature manifests itself and how humankind impact, and is in turn impacted upon, by nature. Essentially, a convenient avenue for generating and communicating knowledge about nature (in terms of economics, politics and sociology of development) has been through formalised discourses in academia. In African contexts, nowadays, we are subtly but unequivocally reminded of the lacunae

that exist in the role of the universities as knowledge production sites for national development – a pointer to probable dysfunctionalisms in the conventional modes of knowledge generation and dissemination.

From all indications, it would appear that something fundamental has changed between the beginnings of modern university education and the contemporary forms in many African countries. Whilst there has been a tremendous growth in size, the expansion has caused "average quality of education to decline in many countries as resources are stretched increasingly thin" (IBRD/World Bank, 2000). Essentially, the expansion has been less differentiated and, therefore, ill-planned to confront emergent development needs. Rather, what is evident is a stupendous replication of traditional disciplinary-based models of knowledge production. These have, nevertheless, increased the richness of knowledge about the universe we live in but without apparently translating into sustainable gains or transforming the societies and economic environments in terms of measurable productive capacities. Acceptably, our universe itself is ever dynamic and not relativistic. Consequently, our immediate environments have tended to generate problems that defy deterministic solutions. In the context of knowledge production, the overarching question is no longer *what we know* about the universe but *how we know what we know*, *i.e.*, positioning the issue of 'knowledge relevance' as a core consideration. Concomitantly, it is also about whether what we know (*i.e.*, realities of our everyday existence) is in anyway informed or influenced by our concept of the university institution. This particular slant will probably take us into the realm of epistemology – the science of knowledge – which we do not intend to engage on this occasion. Critically important, for now, is how Africa's universities are getting Africa and its people to look in the mirror to see for themselves what the continent has become and there-from come to a shared understanding of how it might be transformed.

2.1 Rearticulating the university's role in the sustainable development discourse

Governments everywhere expect the universities to fulfil their roles as major agents in the realisation of the MDGs. They are expected to develop this potential fully:

> "not only for teaching purposes, but also contribute through research in science and technology and in the social and human sciences, to the advance of knowledge, to the creation of new knowledge, to cultural development and fulfillment, to the solving of the problems with which the society is faced, to sustainable development." (UNESCO, 1998)

As both a citadel and cradle of social and economic regeneration and the 'nervous system' for national capacity development, the university in Africa, has been uniquely ascribed the role of leading the region to the 'promised land' of sustainable development (Nwankwo, 2002) – which carries with it all the promises and expectations espoused in the MDGs. This is borne out of the fact that meaningful sustainable development initiatives should, of necessity, be anchored on the support capacity of indigenous and homegrown intellectual and human resource accessibility and manageability.

As knowledge production sites, the expectation for the university's engagement in national economic growth and the broader development agenda is nothing new. From the field of cognitive science, Nelson and Nelson (2002) remind us that human beings draw from their repertoire of knowledge to deal with problems that confront them as a society

– either through *procedural knowledge, declarative knowledge* or both. This implies that there is a link between the *process of knowing* and how a society tackles its problems. Accordingly, this linkage means that understanding how people and societies acquire and use knowledge (and why they sometimes fail to do so) is a necessary guide in understanding how to enhance societal and environmental conditions so as to improve peoples' lives – the thrust of sustainable development. In recognition of this dyad, the World Development Report (1998/99) in its 21st edition examined the complex interrelationship between knowledge on the one hand and economic and social development on the other. It recognised the catalytic effect of knowledge on industrial development and argued that strong economies are built not merely through the accumulation of physical capital and human skill but through a solid foundation of knowledge that is dynamic and responsive. Essentially, the causative relationship between 'knowledge' and 'development' is well established.

In Africa, amidst dwindling resources, budgetary constraints and unfruitful attempts at attracting private investments especially in SSA, it is important that we are concerned about university education, especially in view of the increasing pressure on universities, world-wide, to re-assess their roles and strategies (Merle and Hellstrom, 2000; Wilts, 2000; Etzkowitz *et al*., 2000; Morris, 2002). In fact, some writers (*e.g*., Gibbons *et al*., 1994) have argued that universities in the future may no longer be the main locus of knowledge production largely because of the growing diversification of knowledge production sites. Whether this is being alarmist or not may remain a very open question for some time. For now, however, it is clear that the system of knowledge production is undergoing important changes that necessitate a constant review of the dynamics of university education and research and their relevance in development strategies (Godin and Gingras, 2000; Arocena and Sutz, 2001; Mohrman *et al.*, 2001). Nowhere is this particular realism more forceful than in sub-Saharan Africa mainly because of the perceivably endemic and overbearing institutional failures characterising development programmes in the sub-region (Nwankwo and Richards, 2004).

2.2 Problematisation

Let us attempt to problematise the underlying issue and, from there, offer some generalisations. The most recent assessment of progress on the MDGs (Global Monitoring Report, 2008) concludes that progress seriously lags commitment, suggests an urgent need to scale up action and calls for accelerating and deepening reforms in Africa. It goes on to propose an agenda with three essential elements, as previously articulated by Boughton and Qureshi (2004):

1 accelerating reforms to achieve stronger economic growth – Africa will need to double its growth rate

2 empowering investment in poor people – scaling up and improving the delivery of human development and related key services

3 speeding up implementation of the Monterrey partnership, matching stronger reform efforts with stronger support from developed countries and international agencies.

The real issue is not so much about the intensity or currency of debates on 'sustainable development' in Africa (we do not intend to dwell on the ontology or conceptualisations of the terminology but, for a synthesis, see Nwankwo *et al*., 2008). Rather, concerns are linked to the inherent limitations arising from the process of knowledge production and the university's input that underpins most of the debates. For example, in relation to the three-item agenda above, it is most unrealistic to envisage a double growth rate in a region where negative growth, in real term, is predominant. In the same light, aligning in-country reform efforts with outside support may lead to the sort of dependency syndrome that can only compound the problem. It stands to reason that the only area where African can *take the bull by the horn* is through human capacity development, thus bringing the role of knowledge production sites in the region under deeper critical questioning. Consequently, our theses are simple but somewhat provocative:

- Africa is set to witness a continued reversal of human capacity development unless the degenerative and profoundly decaying state of the university sector (indeed, the overall education system) is mitigated.
- Without a clear awareness of how knowledge is generated and disseminated in the context of 'development' debates (and within this, the role of African universities as production sites), it will be difficult to resolve the contradictions that have hitherto hindered sensible and sustainable responsive strategies to the challenges of national regeneration and/or the attainment of the MDGs.
- Sustainable development cannot take place within an environment that does not afford *value education*; that is, a philosophical worldview that enables the development of intellectual, 'dialogic', technical and moral competencies necessary to embed sustainable development.
- The university system in many African countries is quickly loosing value in science, technology and sustainable development. Thus, the intellectual frames and pedagogical ideals of promoting reflexivity and educating students to become reflective, creative and resourceful in scholarship are being less inspired by an integrated and indigenous concept of education.

3 Value in education

The starting point for these hypotheses, some might say truisms, stems from our idiosyncratic conception of 'value' in education – values that are necessary for sustainable development. Value education can be defined as a process of developing the human-being as a 'whole person', embodying the cultural, political and spiritual. This integrative perspective is not a modern invention. It has a long philosophical tradition that is traceable to the Greek concept of *paedia* from which the word 'pedagogy' derives (Muijen, 2004). Perceivably, this approach has received a great deal of emphasis in contemporary discourses of sustainable development (Nwankwo, 2002) largely because of its persuasive focus on the ideal of a "systematic improvement of our rational faculties, leading to the moral, cognitive and technical development of the individual" and of the society (Muijen, 2004) – in a way that the whole *imaginative and creative person* adds value to the society as a whole. Therefore, the broad concept of 'value education' cannot be divorced from the broader conception of sustainable development.

Thus, tracking value education through the ages, from *enlightenment*, through *romanticism* and to *idealism*, the philosophical thrust is one that is aimed at 'freeing the mind', rehabilitating the intuition, empathy and imagination as 'non-rational' faculties for generating knowledge. Is this not what liberal education should be about (rather than the 'instrumental-calculating' type of thinking that Habermas, in the social sciences, described as 'colonisation of our private world' by different paradigmatic subsystems (see Kuhn, 1970, for a broader epistemological debate)? What this implies is that the relevance of the university in Africa in fostering sustainable growth and development in Africa lies in the degree to which university curricula refinements and developmental programmes are in sync. Accordingly, the envisaged refinements and values in the university curricula are those likely to help in the conceptualisation and locale-driven articulation of 'development needs'. These encompass:

- Values of self; expressive identity of self and group, that is, how people are valued as individuals, members of society or nation.
- Values of co-existence; *e.g.*, value of living together in harmony.
- Value of development; shared meaning of development, *i.e.*, what the people want their nation to be and how they want to live in it.
- Value of the environment; physical environment, human ecology, *etc*.

A better understanding of what 'value' means to a society and how critical it is considered for sustainable development is likely to determine the process through which the university or any other societal institution will function as a delivery conduit or dissemination channel for the realisation of national goals and/or attainment of sustainable development. In this context, 'value' itself ought to translate into an embedded national pre-occupation, with the university as the *value delivery incubator*.

4 Rationalising the new focus

Implicit in the realisation of MDGs is the active and productive participation of Africa in the current multilateral trading arrangements, which increasingly is pointing toward expanding innovation and intellectual property accumulation. This was aptly emphasised by the World Bank's Task Force on Higher Education and Society (IBRD/World Bank, 2000):

> "The world economy is changing as knowledge supplants physical capital as the source of present (and future) wealth. Technology is driving much of this process, with information technology, biotechnology, and other innovations leading to remarkable changes in the way we live and work. As knowledge becomes more important, so does higher education."

Implicitly, the much-taunted "marginalization of Africa" (Collier, 1995) may have something to do with, albeit remotely, the orientation of the region's university sector in the face of global econo-political competitive imperatives. It may be pertinent to shed some light on the global dynamisms of knowledge production in other to appreciate Africa's quagmire in the emerging global setting.

5 Evolutionary epistemology: modes of knowledge production

Gibbons *et al.* (1994) in their seminal work refer to a new form of knowledge production that is emerging alongside the traditional but familiar mode. They claim that this new mode affects not only what knowledge is produced but also how it is produced; the context in which it is pursued and organised. Their work represents a part of the wider movement aimed at explaining the transitionary nature of contemporary research. For example, terms such as 'mode 2', 'post-normal science' and 'triple helix' have been used to describe forms of knowledge production. Also, newly introduced notions such as 'the entrepreneurial university' (Clark, 1998), 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997), 'post-academic science' (Ziman, 1996) and 'the postmodern university' (Smith and Webster, 1997) have been applied to characterise present-day academia. Although these terms have been criticised for lacking empirical substantiation and, perhaps, relatable relevance, they nevertheless have been acclaimed for their general scope and responsiveness towards external goal setting (Wilts, 2000). Basically, these terms point to profound changes impacting patterns and management styles of university education. The impact of these changes is often seen to be fundamental and extensive, leading those who are adept at chronology to claim that we are witnessing a new wave of academic revolution (Martin and Etzkowitz, 2000).

5.1 Academic revolution

The first revolution witnessed an evolution and development of university missions from teaching and conservation of knowledge – the original mission of the university – to research. This first phase of this revolution, *i.e.*, the adding on of research as a major mission to teaching, became evident in the late 19th and early 20th century (Etzkowitz, 2002).

The second revolution imposed on academic institutions a role in economic and social development through extensions of both their research and teaching missions – requiring the creation of boundary-spanning mechanisms. It first occurred in the USA in the agricultural universities that were founded initially as experimental stations to train students in scientific farming (Etzkowitz, 2002). The same parallel could be drawn with the establishment of the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS, University of London) initially as a centre for training colonial administrators on how to control people and resources of the colonies. More recent examples from 'third world' countries include the entrepreneurship incubation system (popular cooperative model) developed by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which has been effectively applied to the problem of poverty. The same logic probably underpins the establishment of some institutions in Africa (for example, universities of science and technology and agriculture in Nigeria). Whether the Nigerian institutions are fulfilling the roles that motivated their establishment is a very open question. However, a successful but rare African example is the ZAMNET, an independent Internet Service Provider (ISP) that was initiated by the University of Zambia following communications systems outage in the country during the past decade. Nonetheless, there is a clear indication that funding for university research in many developed countries has become progressively dependent on the perception of potential contributions to the economy.

A third wave of academic revolution, for all intents and purposes, is well underway. It is heralded by the new managerialism ethos and entrepreneurship in academia (Barry *et al*., 2001) and the transition towards a knowledge-based economy. In this third wave, university research is seen from a perspective of wealth creating potentialities. For example, Etzkowitz *et al*. (2000) demonstrate that the reduction in research funding in the UK has forced universities to become more pro-active in embarking on activities that either attract industry funding or self-generating income. This, in turn, has required a shift in orientation from grant to exchange economy, the re-configuration of institutional relations and management and work systems. Consequently, the nature of the university is re-orienting from the traditional discipline-based to trans-disciplinary and problem-oriented provider of knowledge (Gibbons *et al*., 1994; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2001). It is possible that this emerging trend may turn out to be as far-reaching as the 19th century epochal transformation to a market economy (Polanyi, 1944).

The developments sketched out above suggest a heightened level of dynamism in university education. Evidently, the research industry in modern societies, for example, is no longer the exclusive preserve of the intellectual elite located within the clearly delineated boundaries of university departments. The push towards more reflexivity and social accountability may have arisen from the rigid structures that engendered tightly coupled and controlled university's disciplinary systems that are still prevalent in many universities in Africa. These new dynamisms call for full involvement and effective participation of the private sector in the augmentation of the human capacity development role of African universities.

5.2 Paradigm lost? Issues and paradoxes with the university as a knowledge production site

Some of the factors that impede genuine efforts by Africa to move forward in the global economy are so far-reaching that we cannot attempt to address them here (but see, for example, Finance and Development, 1994; Nwankwo, 1996a; World Bank, 2000; 2001; Nwankwo and Richards, 2001; Ahmed and Nwagwu, 2006). However looked at, the overall effect is that Africa has become more introspective rather than outward-oriented in its developmental path – with a danger that it is heading towards implosion. This claim is not an attempt to make a mountain out of a molehill because the signs are all around us. They are clearly evident in the progressive decay of state and societal institutions, with little or no sign of a turnaround in sight. In this consideration, not only are the universities unable to sustain functional standards, they also lack the capacity for expansive enrolment. Some governments in the region are desperately trying to expand public-private partnership participation. For example, Nigeria is desirous of encouraging public-private sector participation in the development of tertiary education by establishing more private universities partly because, "over one million eligible candidates apply for admission every year, while the country's 57 universities could only accommodate about 160,000 candidates" (Okebukola, 2004).

What sense does sustainable development make, viewed from the frame of contemporary African universities? The region today faces a dilemma: how to sustain its present existence in the face of abject poverty, famine, poorly developed human capital, deteriorating social conditions, as well as realistically forecasting and projecting the

future needs and the requirements for their attainment. Available evidence suggests that SSA in particular is increasingly losing the capacity to sustain basic existence. Within this reality domain, the Darwinian maxim of *survival of the fittest* – more aptly, surviving for today – becomes a philosophical aphorism to which most institutions subscribe. In this regard, it makes sense that any genuine effort at evaluating the progress on the MDGs will have to start from within – not with prescriptions from 'outside'. Africa, to a significant extent, appears to be the architect of its own 'arrested development' and must look inward for strategic inflection points and ways of moving forward.

For sustainable development to be attainable and the role of the university in that process made more meaningful, the debate surrounding it should adopt the same guiding principles observed in nature (see Ahmed, 2009). As Darwin (1977) long ago demonstrated, one of the main guiding principles of the natural world is that sustainability and regeneration come about due to the great diversity inherent in a system. In nature, everything has a place and there is a place for everything (Chaharbaghi and Willis, 1999).

The need for diversity and balance for human society was also recognised in antiquity. According to Plato, the only way for a society to be just is for everyone to have a place and for all to appreciate what that place actually is. Without this, the society will oscillate from one catastrophic extreme to another. Sadly, this is occurring in Africa where progress on the MDGs is seriously off track and needs to be accelerated and deepened (World Bank, 2001; Boughton and Qureshi, 2004; Ahmed and Cleeve, 2004). Evidently, substantial obstacles to achieving the MDGs are likely to be overcome through education and, for this reason, it is education that bridges the chasm between the rhetoric and realities – thus requiring a more careful reflection on the role of Africa's failing university sector.

6 Expectations and realism

It would seem that there is a near-total disconnection between the traditional role of the university in Africa and the evolving responsibilities they expected to take on (*e.g.*, as the catalysts for the realisation of the MDGs and the integration of the region into the global economy). Unfortunately, the contending issues on the ground make such realisation far-fetched. The university has the capacity to harness and crystallise sustainable developmental issues so that the discussion is progressed from rhetoric to actionable agenda – be it in helping to localise the debate and shaping strategies that 'ordinary people' could positively identify with. African universities must have a clear strategic mission as they become bases for economic development. As the revolutionary theorist, Franz Fanon, might have said, the present generation of African universities must discover their mission and either fulfil it or betray it (betrayal is not an option!).

Unravelling the tasks for African universities may raise further questions that are very fundamental and solutions might lead to a possible rethinking or reconceptualisation of the role of the university. What should the university of today be doing that was not done previously? Perhaps, more appropriately, what are the universities of today doing that need re-articulation and expansion, in line with the realities of an extremely competitive global environment which is increasingly propelled by superior knowledge development and acquisition? In what ways might the university create new relevance in the immediate and wider operating environments? How could the university be both

responsive to societal needs and retain its core characteristics – 'the academic heartland' (Clark, 1998)? How could the difficulties associated with strategic adjustments be diminished and a proper balance struck between conflicting expectations and requirements related to academic work? These questions potentially raise the possibilities to alter, even to escape from, the prevailing ways of interpreting and making sense of the role of the university. This is not an exhortation for modernism. It will be dangerous to feign oblivious of the building blocks that sustained the development of traditional African societies. Without a locale-specific explanation, one will necessarily ask the questions: what development? Why bother with the MDGs?

7 Compounding ironies

Hitherto, the prospects for the university to function as a centre for human capacity development in many African countries are compounded by the following (see IBRD/World Bank, 2000, for a wide-ranging exposition of institutional and structural problems):

- The politicisation of the university has wrought unimaginable consequences. The constant interference of the government as well as 'politicians in academic robes' within the university system have blurred the boundaries between professionalism and managerialism, and of academic integrity. The university governing and decision-making councils are usually dominated by government appointees, who may lack the creative capacity for prospective policy articulation and implementation amidst competing demands for scarce resource rationalisation, especially in the era of privatisation and budgetary constraints.
- In most African counties, conditions for research have been severely compromised as manifest by the generally poor remuneration, heavy teaching loads, inability to mentor young faculty and inadequate infrastructure (Sawyerr, 2004).
- The university system in most of the countries of SSA was destroyed and virtually stripped of resources as a result of policy options debilitating economic conditions of the past few decades, exacerbated by political dictatorships across the sub-region in the 1970 and 1980s who tended to place more emphasis on military and military-related spending rather than human capacity development initiatives such as education, health and employability programmes. This was also compounded by corruption and gross mismanagement (World Bank, 1989; Ayittey, 1992). One only need to look at the sorry-state of present Zimbabwe and the near-collapse of the University of Zimbabwe (previously regarded as one of Africa's premier institutions) to get a glimpse of the scale of the problem.
- The Universities are chronically under-funded, even as they face escalating overall demands and therefore unable to cope with severe social pressures confronting them. Student enrolments have grown astronomically but the resources to support or match new demands have declined in like manners. As a result, the ethos of 'university as a community' and space of contestations have been undermined. For example, over 70% of today's university students live in squalor and conditions hardly conducive to learning, libraries and laboratories are few and poorly equipped (Okebukola, 2004;

Briggs, 2004). The precipitate effect in many situations manifest in poor quality teaching and learning experience, outmoded curriculum, socially deviant behaviours amongst students (for example, cultism and armed robbery are real issues for Nigerian universities).

- Rather ironically, there is a historical dimension to the current problem: the military ruling class that dominated the political landscape of Africa in the past few decades believed that university education posed a serious challenge to its continued authority. Academics were seen as 'trouble makers' who must be 'disciplined' or silenced. Academics were thus cowed into brazen docility, leading to disengagement with innovative inquiry and public policy-oriented research-based expositions. Besides, there is also the narrow and misleading view, albeit founded on debatable economic analysis that public investment in universities brings meagre returns compared to investment in tertiary institutions, as well as magnifies income inequalities.

As absurd as these illustrations might be, they are unfortunately the reality of how the survival game is contextually being played out in many African universities.

8 Contextual re-articulation in current dynamics

There is need for a functional and fundamental re-articulation of the overall mission and focus of the university sector in order to make it more relevant in the global dynamics of a knowledge economy. For SSA, a new approach to telling the SD story (with the university as part of the discourse) could emerge through a broad-based and collaborative evaluation and integration of local systems and practices. The 'SD story' could mean different things to different people at different times because language is very elastic and fluid. For African universities, the 'call to duty' is rather urgent. As Professor Felipe Fernandez-Armesto posited in his Royal Society of Arts (RSA) lecture in 2006: *there is no such thing as the present. Everything is instantaneously part of the past. The future is the past that isn't yet happened.* The burden for African universities is how to engage the future to be able to create a past. This can be facilitated through processes of knowledge generation and dissemination that are contextually relevant, socially distributed and accountable. From this platform, it will be much easier to make progress on the overarching agenda of making the future generation more well-off than the present – the challenges must be addressed in a manner that is supportive of SSA's growth and development. This approach shares some philosophical connections with the "practical theory" concept discussed in Rae (2004). In its most simplistic form, it is the constant reconstruction of knowledge to enable people to see connections and create meanings between aspects of their lives and practices, and to account for their actions. It is a specialised, contextualised form of knowing, and the "practical theories of action" (Shotter, 1993) of people who are making sense and creating meaning within their social context – a form of knowledge that can be used to develop an enhanced understanding of SD practice in SSA.

According to the Global Monitoring Report (2008), one of the major reason why SSA have lagged behind in meeting the MDGs is because progress in many cases is undermined by weak institutional capacities for enforcement. The university system is intricately intertwined within the broader institutional perquisites. Therefore,

strengthening the institutions would require improvements of key policy areas in order to ensure that the university plays the deserved role in engendering strong and inclusive growth (*e.g.*, good governance, promoting local entrepreneurship, human capital development), including). The key areas for strategic emphasis, by no means exclusive, include:

- Systematising development objectives: Africa's development, or absence thereof, has lessons for everybody. Lack of progress is bad enough but slipping back is worse. Development initiatives falter when they are not conceived within the framework of sustainability. What does the concept of development mean in African contexts – in a world of debilitating poverty? What should be the principal thrusts of development? The notion of development is relevant insofar as it is related to a context. Without contextual definitions, policies will mean nothing more than theoretical possibilities – making nonsense of the MDGs. The university must provide a focus for crystallising sustainable development thrusts, contextually.
- Plugging human capital deficits: The bases for sustainable growth are increasingly found in skills and knowledge that harness superior capabilities to complement and add value to natural resources as opposed to natural resources with no value added. Development has progressed from a resource-exploitative model to one that is knowledge-based and technology-driven (Ikeme, 2000). The university has capacities within itself to carry the seeds of future economic and social development in the form of human capital, tacit knowledge and intellectual capital. Channelling knowledge flows into new and dynamically evolving arenas is a key academic task – thus placing the university in a new alignment with the changing times. This will potentially impact curriculum development – to integrate, for example, practical employability skills. In fact, there can be no exit from poverty until there is a better-educated population, with flexible life skills to operate in a competitively global economy. The human capital development dilemma of lack of sufficient trained persons is a major obstacle to sustainable progress. SSA's academia will lose relevance if it fails to deliver on this count.
- Developing the university infrastructure: The university should be at the forefront of positive change for regional/national economic development and sustainability. The academic system needs to raise its quality – radical rather than incremental measures must be explored to improve the current system. This will entail de-politicising the university so that it can assume its natural and evolving roles, strengthening research capacities, empowering researchers such that excellence in learning and new knowledge production is fostered. It also entails seeking answers to the following questions: How does research feature in the pecking order of strategic priorities in the universities? How is research quality monitored and promoted? What sort of systems, structures and procedures ought to be implemented in order to enable the university to deliver as a citadel of learning and knowledge transfer? Seeking answers to these questions will obviously bring into focus further questions related to funding; *e.g.*, what funding model will maximise the financial input of the private sector and philanthropic individuals and organisations?

- Implanting good governance: Bad university governance can profoundly damage prospects for economic growth and, indeed, all spheres of human progress. A system run by a corrupt, venal oligarchy (academics whose claim to high offices largely rests on their political networks rather than academic prowess), where academic norms, democratic principles and institutions are brazenly abused merely impoverishes the people both inside and outside academia. Economic progress goes hand in hand with political progress (Nwankwo, 1997). At national levels, the success of South Korea shows what can be achieved when good governance is implanted. It is troubling that the improprieties in the mainstream political system have found their ways into the university system. Equally troubling is the proclivity of the political class to interfere with university governance even at less-than-strategic levels. There is little doubt that sufficient autonomy to the university will lead to more effective utilisation of limited resources. Ideally, the university's internal management system must move-away from the emergent factory management styles (based on authority and control) to one of professionalism and collegialism (based on responsive delegation, trust and secretion). Managing professional service organisations as universities entails management ethos that are different from other management contexts. With good governance comes de-teritorialisation of identities but coagulation around Taylorist 'unity of purpose' in the pursuit of academic excellence; effective co-alignment with traditional academic values which Wilhelm von Humbolt espoused in 1810 in the establishment of the University of Berlin (unity of research and teaching, freedom of teaching and academic self-governance).
- Building social capital: This involves the re-discovery of culturally based social ties and networks that hold communities together. Development is not about cultural atavism or jettisoning traditional values and indigenous knowledge and skills. It is about promoting healthy continuity. If the concept of development in the modern lexicon is premised on untainted institutional paradigms (*e.g.*, culture-driven socialisation processes and governance systems), then most African societies would have been on the top league table among MDGs achievers. The capacity for university's engagement is rather huge on this count.
- Promoting the local economy: Identifying and supporting new sources of competitive advantage within the local/regional economy and projecting these outward – both at national and international levels. European pre-eminence in modern design rests with a localised skill base that dates back to the Renaissance. For example, locally concentrated networks are characteristic features of the Italian industrial organisation – the knitwear producers of Capri, the shoemakers of Varese, the metal workers of Lumezzane. Although these groupings are based on small firms, with production facilities sometimes still attached to houses (they are not cottage industries in any pejorative sense), they are the foundations of the national competitive advantage of Italy. Perhaps, the African University should take the lead in helping the world to understand what Africa is good at and how to grow and perfect those things in a way that confers competitive superiority, nationally, regionally and, ultimately, internationally.

- Developing strategic networks and partnership: Academics in African universities must recognise the strategic importance of building networks with disaporic African scholars. A vast amount of resources is out there which could be harnessed in order to hasten a strategic turnaround in African universities. It is ironic that academics, who often examine the minutae of inter-organisational relationship development and management, have singularly failed to look at how their own networks may be developed for individual and collective good (Lowrie and McKnight, 2004). There is demonstrable evidence that African scholars in the diaspora, who are themselves leading cutting-edge strategic development initiatives in all spheres of scholarly endeavours especially in developed countries, are passionate in seeking joined-up approaches to Africa's problems. An example may be gleaned from the work being carried out under the auspices of the International Academy of African Business and Development (IAABD).

9 Conclusions

For Africa, how 'new intelligence' on growth and development is generated and disseminated will prove a critical determinant of success with regard to the MDGs achievement. Clearly, a contextual analysis would reveal an increasing role for the university. Essentially, the university should assume its natural and ascribed responsibilities based on the Foucauldian ideas of political struggle, that is, a view that this 'struggle' shares some parallel with "politics of the self" (Foucault, 1985; Bernauer and Mahon, 1994). This is because 'development' may be conceived as a political ethic. Thus, in the realm of a political struggle, resistance against different forms of domination and exploitation also entails combat with the different forms of discursive power (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002). If it is acknowledged that power and discourse constitute a base for human subjectivity, then an important aspect of this combat is to "refuse what we are" but rather "invent, not discover, who we are" (Foucault, 1980) – by inventing, developing, and promoting new forms of subjectivity that are likely to become the sources of effective resistance to 'oppressive' powers (Bernauer and Mahon, 1994). This "politics of the self" and the ethico-critical reflection it involves (Falzon, 1998; Moisander and Pesonen, 2002) constitutes a mode of self-information – a moral action that will enable African universities to engage in radical questioning and re-questioning of the broader conditions that made the 'African world' what it has become. The university is sufficiently a robust societal institution to guide this critical and reflective evaluation and could help develop the collective ability to question the conditions that account for Africa's present subjectivity and to start imagining and building new kinds of subjectivities. As aptly enjoined by President Benjamin Mkapa of Tanzania, African universities "must produce men and women willing to fight an intellectual battle for self-confidence and self-assertion as equal players in the emerging globalized world" (IBRD/World Bank, 2000, p.15).

In the urgent need to make progress on the MDGs, it might be tempting to take a rather 'reductionist' stance by 'pigeonholing' the role of the university in Africa, just as it would be exaggeratively presumptuous to ascribe to it an exclusive and perhaps omnipotent role. It is unlikely that any significant progress could be made without the collaborative and complementary participation of all the stakeholders. What the

university represents and the institutional relevance it has is one of superior, organised participation and dissemination, hence the need for a reformed, re-focused and expansively dynamic new institution, which is sensitive and responsive to its 'increased and visible' new mission. African universities should be the trailblazers in the MDGs' realisation.

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