

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND THE ROLE OF STUDENTS IN AFRICA

Paper Submitted to the Association of African Universities, (AAU)

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The 12th General Conference of the Association of African Universities, AAU, with the theme; *Sustainable Development in Africa: The Role of Higher Education* is timely and appropriate because it is coming in a qualitatively different political climate in Africa and in the world. In looking at this theme, it will enable us to identify the roles of students in the sustainable development of Africa. The roles of students will be examined by exploring the opportunities and challenges related to *teaching and learning, community services, IT and Health*. The student role must be prioritised to address the opportunities and challenges in the sustainable development of Africa. In this regards, this paper will portray student organisations as viable partners in development and core active participants from the academic community.

It is expected that African students and their organizations must demonstrate significant strides in the sustainable development efforts of their respective countries. AASU is actively monitoring the process of implementation of Agenda 21 in Africa as one of the major groups under the UN Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) which is overseeing the implementation of the Rio de Janeiro Agreement on the Environment and Sustainable Development. AASU was an active participant in the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in 2002 in Johannesburg, south Africa.

In view of student capacity in terms of population and commitment, AASU has continued to make sustainable development a reality in Africa through various efforts and collaboration with local member unions. For years, youth have shown a willingness and commitment to play an active role in development via student *governance, information technology, and academic freedom and autonomy* (e.g. Libya, Sudan, Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Kenya, Togo and Liberia).

AASU utilise university campuses as sustainable models by engaging in programmes to educate and train communities, including work-based education on sustainable development issues in partnerships with institutions of learning, trade unions, business, local authorities and other interested partners. Local student groups work together with the administration to use renewable and sustainable resources on campuses.

Some of AASU member unions established sustainable IT centres with virtual classrooms in rural communities and networked with universities (e.g. Benghazi Polytechnic, Libya, University of Benin students union, Nigeria). Using multi-media conferencing methodologies, young people are trained in areas of their interest and learn new skills and techniques, such as web design, computer programming and organic sustainable agriculture techniques (e.g. South Africa Union of Students, SAUS). Initiatives to engage in effective peer to peer sexual health education, implementing programmes aimed at promoting the concept and practice of positive

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living, as well as, put in place mechanisms to ensure behavioural change amongst youth in the fight against HIV/AIDS in our society.

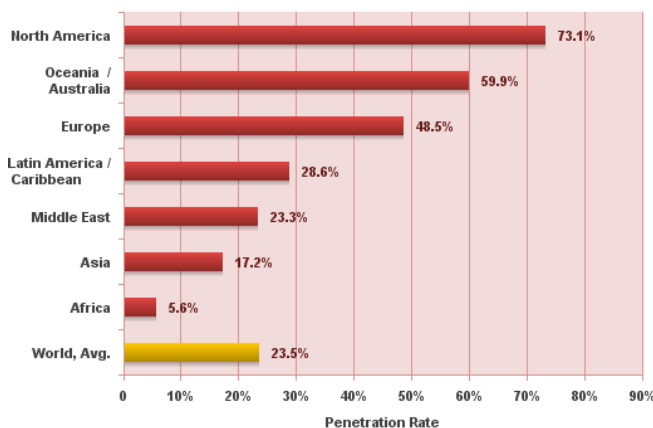
The concept of sustainable development and role of students

The Brundtland Commission articulated the message of sustainable development as meeting the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Our Common Future, 1987). It is no doubt that education is crucial to the achievement of sustainable development and the role of students and youth is very crucial. Student organizations all over Africa have been urged to put their thinking caps on for a competition dedicated to making our continent a better place to live in. They are being encouraged to come up with a scheme that makes their place of learning and their community a prime example of sustainable life. AASU was part of the historic Johannesburg meeting on sustainable development, where we identified priorities areas for youth and affirmed that there are a number of prerequisites for the realization of sustainable development. These include achieving peace, democracy, transparency in governments, the eradication of corruption, the elimination of discrimination in all forms, the stabilisation of the human population and living within the limits of the earth's carrying capacity. We further identified education as a veritable tool to train communities, including work-based education on sustainable development issues in partnership with institutions of learning, trade unions, business, local authorities and other interested partners.

Some of the sustainable activities embarked upon by the All-Africa Students Union and its member unions are in the area of information technology. The New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD) identified information technology as a powerful tool for promoting sustainable development in Africa. It is important for Africa to take a giant step in the age of information revolution since the continent was nowhere to be found in the time of the industrial revolution. In the present world, where the price of oil and cocoa, which form major source of

income in Africa is falling every day, We Africans have no alternative than to be creative and generate other sources for our sustainability in order to insulate ourselves from future global economic meltdowns. AASU in conjunction with our member unions have used the internet to a greater extent to promote sustainable development despite all the challenges and the barriers in terms of access to computers, high cost of internet connection and poor electrification system in most countries in the continent. Of the world's major regions, Africa has the least Internet penetration at 5.6% of the population (World Internet Usage Statistics - 2009).

**World Internet Penetration Rates
by Geographic Regions**



Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Penetration Rates are based on a world population of 6,710,029,070 for full year 2008 and 1,574,313,184 estimated Internet users.
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Barriers to Internet use include irregular or nonexistent electricity supplies, inadequate telephone networks, and shortages of trained people

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(parley, 2003; Mbarika et al, 2002). Presently, more than fifty percent of our member unions and local student organizations have access to the email; about ten percent have functioning websites, therefore, making communication and educational interaction possible. The percentage is still not satisfactory but better as compared to what was obtainable ten years ago.

Through the use of the internet, students have been able to gain new knowledge and share information about human rights, academic freedom and problems affecting them in their different locations.

With the aid of IT, our networks in South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria and Libya have been able to train young people on the use of computers and the internet. Our member union in Libya, GUSPLAJ has thousands of volunteers that travel around rural communities, and countries like Sudan and Niger to train secondary school children on computer education. There are student volunteers in Burkina Faso and other Arab speaking countries in Africa. The GUSPLAJ is currently supporting a student based project on how to write programs in Arabic and other African languages.

AASU, through our networks have been at the forefront of exposing young people to many opportunities on the internet and dissuading them from being involved in cybercrimes. In recent time, there are a number of cyber crimes being perpetrated by young people through internet fraud which they nick named “Yahoo-yahoo”. Through our educational program, we have initiated web design programs, programming language and graphic design and other related IT programs where young people can make money based on their knowledge of IT rather than sending fraudulent mails to dupe innocent people. The South African Union of Students, (SAUS) and the National Association of Nigerian Students, (NANS) have partnered with AASU in organizing training and support workshops in South Africa and Nigeria. It is our projection that in the next few years, there should be “made in Africa” super computers that can be exported to another continent. We drew our inspiration from India and Malaysia where students are at the forefront of ICT revolution. Our perspective is the empowerment of young people through self-reliant sustainable communities in Africa.

As part of our efforts, University of Ilorin, Nigeria hosted AASU workshop on ICT in the year 2002. The program was sponsored and reasonably financed by the National Universities Commission under the leadership of Prof. Peter Okebukola (former Executive Secretary of NUC). The Executive Committee Meeting of AASU in South Africa in 2006 was devoted to ICT and leadership in Africa.

Students have also used the internet effectively to engage in peer to peer sexual education. The email network and websites have been used effectively to run campaigns against HIV/AIDS among students and communities in the continent. Virtually all the student organizations that own different websites have internet based campaigns on HIV/AIDs. Students have direct access to the latest information and updated campaigns about the dreaded diseases. The tools have been

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used effectively for campaigns on sexual education and the need for students and workers to be involved in the campaign to stop the pandemic.

In the area of Governance, corruption is one area identified as a big threat for sustainable development in Africa. These are embedded in leadership seminars and workshops series packaged by the all Africa Students Union in partnership with our member unions in various countries in Africa. For example in Ghana, National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) was actively involved in recent monitoring of election of Ghana. Even though, the election was not celebrated by the international community as expected, of course, it is no doubt that the last election in Ghana remains the best in the history of our democracy in Africa. Students played very important roles in the peaceful process through educational programs, teaching and monitoring. Through the power of internet, the NUGS was able to reach out to a lot of people on the Facebook and the email network to educate people against political violence and the need for young people to embrace peace towards the successful outcome of the election. There were thousands of volunteers that traveled to villages and all the remote areas of Ghana for educational purposes.

Today, AASU is an affiliated member of various environmental NGOs in a coalition campaign on Green of Our Communities by utilizing university campuses as sustainable models for other offices and institutions in society. Local student groups work together with the administration to use only renewable and sustainable resources on campuses. Students are encouraged to plant trees on campuses and also emulate a recycle process in order keep our environment clean.

Of course, the role of Agriculture cannot be over emphasized in the sustainable development. A continent blessed with fast land and good climatic condition like Africa has no excuse of becoming the foremost food basket for the whole world. AASU has on several occasions encouraged our member unions to acquire land and get involved in mechanize farming. Some local member unions are already implementing our proposal. Students in South Africa are volunteering to teach rural people on mechanize farming. Our member union in Libya, GUSPLAJ has a big farm that produces enough grain to supply a country of about 2 million people. Others would have followed suit but the problem has been the issue of finance and lack of interest by the government in providing support.

AASU has identified population movement as a priority area for sustainability of our continent. Population movement in terms of voluntary and forced migration has been a major problem that has left Africa with the problem of “Brain Drain”. AASU is working closely with other NGOs in our campaign for “Brain Gain” for Africa. We have partnered with Ghana Immigration Migration Bureau to educate students on irregular migration. It was discovered that most of our young graduates prefer to travel abroad after the completion of their programs. Some did not even wait to complete their program before travelling out of Africa in search of a greener pasture. It is disheartening that most of them take an illegal route to their destination and end up becoming modern slaves in their final destination. Some may not be lucky to make it to their destination and end up in prisons or sometimes perished on the way. This problem could be

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traced to the poor infrastructures and attitudinal problem of our government towards youth development. Poverty is another major factor that has disillusioned young people and has made them to completely lose hope in their motherland Africa. The purpose of the program is to let students see the reason why they must stay in Africa in order to use their acquired skills and knowledge to develop our continent. It is our view that the irregular migration or forced migration possesses a huge negative implication on sustainable development for Africa. Therefore, "Brain Gain" and migration campaign was officially launched on November 17, 2008 at the AASU conference in Ghana. As part of follow activities, a conference title "AASU and African Diaspora Conference" is scheduled for June 16, 2009 at the Morgan State University, Baltimore. The idea is to connect with the Diaspora Africans with the hope that the Migrant communities abroad "can help foster innovation, trigger learning processes or facilitate the transfer of knowledge and technology to their countries of origin." The skills and knowledge that migrants can acquire during their time abroad can be transferred to the country of origin through temporary and managed return processes, while they can also act as promoters of trade and investors in countries of origin.

Creative Partnership

AASU and its member unions would have done much better but the barrier has been finances and the uncooperative attitude of donor and government agencies in assisting student organizations. The international donor agencies prefer to support "big names" or big organization so to say. I have not seen any youth organization that has direct access to funding coming to Africa on sustainable development. The donors always raise the bar too high with stringent conditions that no student organizations could meet in order to obtain funding for their project. The "accident" of it all is that most of these funds either go to the government and political office holders, who will in turn give the fund to their wives or relative, that have formed different NGOs under various name in disguise to corner international funds for their personal use.

Another barrier is that most universities in Africa have failed to see student organizations as partners in development. It is important that this gap is bridged between the management and student organizations. The cooperation between student organizations and big NGOs are not enough. We should all recognize the fact that no one person or institution has the "right" answer when phenomena and events are dynamically and systemically interconnected. Sustainable development, as an all-englobing concept, defies appropriation by a particular interest group, least of all by so-called experts who often tend to be more reductionist as a result of years of study and reflection away from the "real world."

Conclusion

The efforts of the Association of African Universities, (AAU) are highly commendable. The AAU has served as a pillar of support for the All-Africa Students Union for several years. Their effort has encouraged the union to grow and think strategically for future development of the continent.

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Our resolve at the WSSD in South Africa has never changed. “We will continue to make sustainable development a reality”. We call for an ethical framework for sustainable development in accordance with national, regional and local priorities. We commit ourselves to the aforementioned priorities and commitments, and demand the implementation of concrete and timely actions for sustainable development. These must be effected within an acceptable global governance and financing framework which recognises the need for strengthening the economies of developing countries.

To African Governments, it is time for action to ensure a better future. Enough of a long line of empty promises and missed opportunities. Lip services are not enough.

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