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Building capacity for innovation in Africa's largest and most diverse industry: universities in agricultural learning platforms

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There is no doubt about the capacity of Africans to be successful innovators but most of the examples of successful African entrepreneurs come from the Diaspora rather than from the Continent. This irony is most evident in Africa's largest and most diverse industry; agriculture. About 95% of investment in agricultural research is allocated to national agricultural research systems and there are over 200 African universities and colleges with agricultural teaching and research programmes and yet Africa is indebted to a handful of international research centres for much of the new knowledge required for agricultural development.

Africa has relied for its agricultural development on official programmes and projects that are based on heroic assumptions that the human and institutional capacity will be there when it is needed, without committing to the investment required to build that capacity. South and Southeast Asian nations, which took off with relatively weaker economies, chose to focus on strengthening their capacity to build capacity and building infrastructure. The fact that Korea, for example, now has 10 times the per capita income of Ghana suggests that their approach was more successful.

This paper discusses how African tertiary agricultural education networks, agricultural research organizations and development programmes could work together as a learning platform to strengthen Africa's endogenous capacity for agricultural innovation. It makes the case that without better integration of African universities in major initiatives such as the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme they will not have the impact required to place Africa where it should be as greatest hope for the world to be able to sustainably feed, not only the one in six persons who are presently underfed and malnourished, but also the still rapidly expanding human population.

Key words: innovation, development, education, research, integration