

ASSOCIATION OF AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

12th General Conference on Sustainable Development in Africa: The Role of Higher Education

Background

The Association of African Universities (AAU) is an international non-governmental organization set up in November 1967 by Universities in Africa to promote cooperation among themselves and between them and the international academic community. With a current membership of 212 higher education and research institutions, drawn from all regions and language groups within the continent, the AAU aspires to be the voice of the African higher education community.

More specifically, the Mission of the AAU is to raise the quality of higher education in Africa and strengthen its contribution to African development by fostering cooperation and collaboration among its member institutions; providing support to their core functions of teaching, learning, research and community engagement; and facilitating critical reflection on, and consensus-building around, issues affecting higher education and the development of Africa.

Among the constitutional organs of the AAU is the Conference of Rectors, Vice- Chancellors, and Presidents of African Universities (COREVIP), made up of the chief executive officers of AAU member institutions or their representatives, as well as invited higher education leaders and policy makers. COREVIP meets once every two years to examine themes of common concern and priority for the development of higher education in Africa, and make recommendations to its members, as well as to all other higher education stakeholders.

Preamble

The World Conservation Union (IUCN) coined the term “sustainable development” in 1980. Since then, it has received several interpretations confirming the definition given by the Brundtland Commission in 1987. The report defined sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Brundtland Report was specific on three components of sustainability, namely, equity, growth and the environment.

In a world undergoing rapid changes, driven prominently by technology and globalisation, it is often forgotten that the drive towards sustainable development is about change in people - their ideas, their fears, and the capacity to imagine and work together for a different and better future. More than any other region of the world, Africa remains unprotected and at risk of being exploited without due recognition and remuneration of its resources. There is also the fact that Africa’s sustainability problems hinge on threats to food security, poverty, disease, land degradation, water security, climate change, conflicts, deforestation, natural disasters, and urbanization.

It is now widely acknowledged that education is crucial to the achievement of sustainable development. However, it was at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio that the centrality of the role of education for achievement of sustainable development was particularly highlighted. Agenda 21, as it is commonly referred to, had 41 African nations endorsing a comprehensive international framework and action programme for sustainable development. This consensus of the international community was consolidated by the UN General Assembly at its 57th meeting in December 2002, when it declared the period 2005-2014 as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UN DESD) to be implemented by UNESCO. UNESCO, in fact, defines Education for

Sustainable Development as “a dynamic concept that encompasses a new vision of education that seeks to empower people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future”.

The UN DESD offers a strategic guide to the African higher education community to review its curricula, set and undertake development relevant scientific research, forge partnerships and set practical examples towards ensuring social, economic, environmental and overall inter-generational equity within the concept of the Millennium Development Goals and other African development agenda.

The essence of education is to explore the edges of possibility and probability needed to transform and improve upon the conditions of both the learner and the community. Though basic education is essential in providing literacy and a knowledge of how and why things happen, higher education has a special responsibility to conduct the scholarship and scientific research necessary to generate the new knowledge needed, and to train the leaders and teachers of tomorrow, laying emphasis on integrative learning and the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings.

The three main activities of higher education, whether in Africa or elsewhere, are teaching and learning, research and development and service to the community. Within the ambit of sustainable development, African higher education institutions are provided with the tools to redesign their educational structures to provide answers to the environmental and developmental challenges confronting the continent.

The 12th General Conference of the Association of African Universities with the theme **Sustainable Development in Africa: The Role of Higher Education** was co-hosted by the University of Ilorin and the University of Abuja, Nigeria, and held at the International Conference Centre, Abuja, Nigeria from 4th to 9th May, 2009.

The Objective of the Conference was to address the mandate of higher education institutions regarding teaching and learning, research and community service including greening the campuses as they relate to sustainable development in Africa.

The Conference was executed in two parts:

- i. The AAU Business Session that concentrated on AAU issues such as reports on the Association’s 4 year programmes, deliberations on the next 4 year programmes leading to another General Conference, and elections to the Executive Board; and
- ii. The Scientific session, the Conference of Rectors, Vice-Chancellors and Presidents of African Universities (COREVIP) that dealt with the presentation of papers on the Conference theme.

The Conference was attended by 250 participants from 28 African countries and 7 countries outside Africa. Participation at the Conference also comprised other stakeholders of university education and development partners.

WE, participants at the 12th General Conference of AAU co-hosted the University of Ilorin and the University of Abuja, held in Abuja, Nigeria, from 4 – 9 May, 2009,

Noting that

- The terminology “sustainable development” was coined by The World Conservation Union (IUCN) in 1980;

- Development will be sustainable if it "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"
- The world is undergoing rapid changes and is driven prominently by technology and globalisation,
- Africa remains unprotected and at risk of being exploited without due recognition and remuneration of its resources.
- Africa's sustainability problems hinge on threats to food security, poverty, disease, land degradation, water security, climate change, conflicts, deforestation, natural disasters, and urbanization.
- Education explores the edges of possibility and probability needed to transform and improve upon the conditions of both the learner and the community, and is crucial to the achievement of sustainable development
- Higher Education has a special responsibility to conduct the scholarly and scientific research necessary to generate the new knowledge needed, and to train the leaders and teachers of tomorrow, laying emphasis on integrative learning and the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings.

Acknowledging that

- The real challenges for sustainable development in Africa are the promotion of economic and industrial development, the eradication of poverty, the resolution of conflicts, and the optimum use of its natural resources.
- The African Higher Education research agenda tend to focus on purely academic and scientific objectives, to ensure publication in refereed journals, with little regard to developmental needs because of the "publish or perish" syndrome,
- Most of the research works in Africa are rarely relevant to the search for continental solutions to health, education, water, climate change, energy and food security - all sustainable development indices.
- Where research has been conducted in relevant areas, the findings have remained largely on shelves and unavailable to those who need to take action or implement the often useful recommendations.
- Strong emphasis on the use of scientific and technological methods and tools, and innovative approaches are essential in guiding the setting of the African research and development agenda.
- Institutional collaboration, such as trilateral university-industry-government linkage would not only ensure the direction of research but also the optimum and efficient use of both human and physical resources.

Hereby Call Upon

(a) Africa's Higher Education Institutions to:

- Completely re-engineer the system to effectively achieve Higher Education for Sustainable Development in Africa (HESDA) and employ the Trans-disciplinary approach to teaching and research and operationalise this by emphasising programme integration and synergy to promote staff and student exchanges;
- Establish internal democracy in University governance
- Improve quality, focus and employability of graduates to make them relevant to national needs and be globally competitive;
- Forge partnership with government and the private sector

- Introduce entrepreneurial education and adopt outcome – based curricula that are periodically assessed.
- Embrace the Open Access Initiative and develop appropriate software to address concerns on intellectual property protection and plagiarism.
- Commit to Greening the Campuses.

(b) National Governments and Regional Organisations should:

- Ensure adequate funding of Higher Education Institutions by committing at least 3% of GDP to education to enable the institutions effectively and efficiently achieve their mandate of teaching, research and community service;
- Reduce bureaucratisation and homogenisation of Universities;
- Consider embracing the Earth charter;
- Emphasize spirituality, ethics and morality in the curricula for sustainable development of Africans.

(c) Development Partners

- Interested in engaging in academic programmes and pursuits in Africa, must be willing and ready to work with African HEIs in a collaborative partnership.
- Should increase Intervention in the area of funding
- Organisations responsible for environmental degradation should put in place adequate mitigating measures to reduce the burden on Africa

Abuja, Nigeria
8 May, 2009

DECLARATION DRAFTING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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