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STRENGTHENING HUMAN AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPITAL TO
SUPPORT RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: WHAT HAVE WE
LEARNED AND WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES? A SYMPOSIUM IN
HONOUR OF PROFESSOR CARL K. EICHER

ORGANIZERS **ERIC CRAWFORD, JOHN STRAUSS, JOHN
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Carl K. Eicher, University Distinguished Professor at Michigan State University, recently retired after a 39-year career devoted to African agricultural development, training African students and strengthening universities and research institutions. To honour Professor Eicher, former students and colleagues gathered to discuss the three themes summarized below, which reflect his work.

The role of the African university in supporting agricultural transformation and economic development

Presenter *Eric Tollens, Catholic University of Louvain*

African universities face several dilemmas. Demand for university education is expanding at a time of donor fatigue and diminishing funding. New university campuses are being created, but the quality of education, from low-paid faculty with few operational resources, is deteriorating. Governance is a problem since university leaders are often political appointees with short-term planning horizons. Universities not conforming with government views face reduced budgets. Donors have promoted the land-grant university model, but have not succeeded in helping African universities to build local constituencies that would give them political support.

University training of agricultural economists has not resulted in interventions that directly benefit the poor, which is a consequence of inappropriate curricula and inadequate institutional incentives for graduates to apply their training. Nonetheless, most participants disagreed with the current donor emphasis on primary education. While studies often show higher returns from primary than from university education, these calculations usually count only private benefits. Economists have failed to document the social benefits generated by universities, including creation of agricultural research capacity.

Others noted that the proliferation of public and private universities may be a normal part of economic development. The Philippines, as one case, had

more than 1400 degree-granting universities responding to private sector needs as early as the 1970s. Some universities are changing to make themselves more relevant. For example, Makerere University in Uganda is experimenting with new programmes to improve local governance capacity, as political and fiscal authority is decentralized. African universities are partnering with Northern universities to create high-quality joint degree schemes. Regional centres of excellence are emerging; for instance the University of Pretoria is attracting agricultural economics students from across Africa because of its reputation for low-cost, locally relevant teaching. The foundations (Ford, Rockefeller and MacArthur) are also showing renewed interest in university capacity building.

Strengthening agricultural research, extension and policy analysis

Presenters Akin Adesina (Rockefeller Foundation) and Isaac Minde (ECAPAPA)

Discussant Doyle Baker (FAO)

African agricultural research institutions have exhibited a steep decline in agricultural research expenditures; instability in research organization, leadership and staff; declining research output during the 1990s; and slow adaptation to the changes brought about by economic liberalization, the spread of AIDS and globalization.

Many problems also afflict agricultural extension in Africa: weak links between research, extension and farmers; lower status, respect and remuneration for extension agents than for researchers; expansion of extension agent numbers without expansion of operational budgets; irrelevant extension messages based on technology that does not fit farmer circumstances; weak agricultural extension curricula in higher education institutions; numerous alternative extension models, but little rigorous research on their cost-effectiveness; and little adoption yet of new information technologies.

Participants questioned whether governments should support research institutions as currently constituted. For two decades, donors and governments have focused on building technical agricultural research capacity, without imparting research management skills. Most countries are too small to afford programmes that cover all commodities and enterprises. Resolving these problems will require (a) setting hard priorities and improving the integration of different scientific disciplines, and (b) strengthening regional research organizations.

Research and extension services are increasingly under pressure to focus on commercial crops in high-potential areas. Subsistence farmers who are not well integrated into the market may be left out, unable to gain access to new technology. The emphasis on commercialization is also unlikely to stimulate development of technologies that help preserve the environment.

The role of cooperation from the North in strengthening human and institutional capital to support rural development in Africa

Presenters *Derek Byerlee (World Bank), Lane Holdcroft (AEAI)*

Discussant *Edouard Tapsoba (FAO)*

During the 1970s–90s, donors hoped that support of agricultural research and extension would bring a ‘Green Revolution’ to Africa. From 1981 to 2000, they invested about \$1 million per scientist, or \$200 per farmer. However, technology development and diffusion have been only modestly and narrowly successful. Unable to convince government leaders of the potential contribution of agricultural research and extension to economic development, despite impressive impacts for some discoveries, managers of these services have generally not won significant increases in government funding.

Donor aid to African agricultural improvement has been characterized by inadequate attention to building linkages with farmers and other local constituents who might provide financial and political support for research and extension services. More recently, donors have emphasized decentralization as a way to make agricultural services more responsive to users. Many participants saw this as positive, but were not convinced that it has yet resulted in broadly diffused technical change. Because participation is costly, there is urgent need to know at what level it is most useful. Also demand-driven governance systems may be difficult to establish if they are not valued by public institutions. Only in a few countries, such as Uganda, does political decentralization seem to enjoy substantial government backing and resources.

More generally, agricultural development programmes must increasingly compete for funds with special interest groups focused on AIDS, child health and the environment. While all these are important, donors need to recommit themselves to providing long-term support for the prime movers of agricultural development by investing in people, in universities and in agricultural research and extension.