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Collaborative Masters Program in Agricultural and Applied Economics for Eastern, Central and Southern Africa

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Program Genesis:

Since the 1970s, African economies have under-performed and incomes have declined. Similarly, the agricultural sectors have malfunctioned and agricultural production shrunk despite over two-thirds of the population being dependent on agriculture for survival subjecting them to food insecurity, reduced incomes, massive poverty, unemployment and unsustainable resource utilisation. The decline in agricultural performance was brought about by numerous factors, including markets dynamics that tended to protect the agricultural products of developed nations at the expense of developing economies; persistent institutional weakness and market failures in Africa; poor linkage of policy results to policy making and implementation; poor understanding of environmental impact assessment and management skills for sustainable agricultural development; poor understanding of smallholder agriculture; and inadequate appreciation or understanding of the role of Science, Technology and Information in promoting rapid agricultural and rural development as well as overall economic growth and development. In response to the above situation and the realisation of the changing trends in markets, there arose the need to re-examine ways and means of managing and promoting agricultural development, which forms the backbone of many African economies. It was visualised that one way of tackling the problem was through enhancing capacity for policy analysis in agriculture in order to allow effective generation and supply of relevant information on agricultural production and marketing to policymakers. IFPRI and its 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture and Environment established a network of researchers in agricultural economics in Eastern Africa in an effort of enhancing the capacity in policy analysis and research. The Regional Advisory Committee (RAC) was established to guide the network in undertaking competitive research grants among other critical activities. After one year in operation, the RAC realised there was a great shortage of skilled manpower to undertake policy analysis research in the region and established a Steering Committee to examine the problem. With financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation, an inquiry by Norman and Obwona was conducted, which revealed there was inadequate capacity for agricultural policy analysis, formulation and implementation. This was blamed on inadequate Agricultural Economics postgraduate training scholarships to overseas universities in particular and limited Governments' support for postgraduate training locally due to budgetary constraints. The Steering Committee suggested that a sustainable cost effective capacity building mechanism was seriously needed to help resolve problems that were being experienced in institutions of higher learning. To put the mechanism in place, a conference involving Heads of Departments of Agricultural Economics in Eastern and Southern Africa, and other participants from the private and public sectors was convened in November 2002 to examine the future challenges to agricultural economics. The conference adopted that the heads of agricultural economics departments should formulate plans for strengthening agricultural economics training in the region through a Collaborative program. After the conference, heads of departments formed the umbrella body AEEB and started working on the collaborative masters program. The vision of this collaborative program is "to train graduates with a solid foundation in economic concepts and methods for applied analysis in the public, civil society and private sectors, as well as offer opportunity for advanced academic pursuits". The main objectives of the program are to: advance Agricultural Economics as a core disciplinary course at MSc level in Eastern & Southern Africa; produce graduates who are conversant with problems facing the agricultural sector in Africa and with the capability to provide practical solutions; set up a system for upgrading the teaching and research capacity of faculties in the participating departments; as well as enhance a collaborative network amongst the many players in agricultural economics.

Program Planning Phase

The Planning Phase of the Collaborative masters program started with an inquiry by Norman & Obwona into capacities for economic policy research in Eastern & Southern Africa in 2001 that was facilitated by IFPRI with funding from Rockefeller Foundation, which showed deficiencies in teaching, research and policy analysis. The results were validated in a stakeholders' meeting in October 2001.

Later on in November 2002 a conference was held with an aim of assessing the futures challenges to agricultural economics in the region, and the participating departments were given the responsibility of seeking the best approach of addressing the challenge facing agricultural development in the region. After the meeting, the heads of participating departments came together under the umbrella body, Agricultural Economics Education Board (AEEB) to drive the initiative in the planning phase.

The planning phase has enhanced the collaboration of AEEB and development of the plan document to guide the activities of the program. Currently, the program involves a collaboration of 16 Public University Departments of Agricultural Economics in 12 countries, which include Botswana College of Agriculture (Botswana); University of Alemaya (Ethiopia); University of Nairobi, Egerton University, Moi University, and Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (Kenya); Bunda College of Agriculture (Malawi); Eduardo Mondlane University (Mozambique), University of Rwanda (Rwanda); Stellenbosch University and University of Pretoria (South Africa); University of Swaziland (Swaziland); Sokoine University of Agriculture (Tanzania); Makerere University (Uganda); University of Zambia (Zambia) and University of Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe).

Program Validation

To ensure that the program is demand driven, efforts have been made to involve clients on the demand side to validate the process. Two validation exercises were accomplished during the planning phase with the first being a presentation at the international Association of Agricultural Economists (IAAE) conference held in Durban, South Africa in August 2003. The aim of the exercise was to receive comments from the international community of Agricultural Economists as well as inform the rest of Africa about the existence of the collaborative program whose aim is to promote agricultural development in the region.

The second validation process was conducted through National stakeholders' consultative workshops that were held in September 2003 in the 12 participating countries. The workshops obtained views from personnel in institutions of higher learning, public and private sectors on the suitability of the program in meeting the market demands. Workshops results indicated that the program was of great relevance to the region, and there was willingness among potential learners and employers to pay for training in the program.

Key Features of the Program

Unlike many other programs offered in institutions of higher learning in the region, the collaborative Masters program has its distinctive features that make it world-class training program. They include:

- Program that is informed through visits to best-practice institutions to understand how best agricultural economics as a training discipline is offered. The program has also been validated through stakeholder consultations to ensure that it offers what is best for market;
- The program intends to have a broadened intake profile where applicants will be drawn from diverse disciplines rather than restricting intake to those with agricultural background. Through this, it will create the required capacity for the diverse groups of professionals directly and indirectly involved in agricultural development. The broad intake targets those with background in agriculture, engineering, humanities and science;
- Unlike in the mainstream agricultural economics programs where exposure to institutional setting is rare, students will have an exposure to Behavioural and Institutional Economics as a way of re-

thinking the institutional settings, the way they operate in the region, their strengths and challenges in agricultural development;

- The program will also use electronic technology (ICT) in training. This will enhance availability of learning materials through subscription to world-renowned journals, provide linkage with other universities across the world, as well as enhance collaborative activities between the teaching staff in the participating universities. ICT will promote speedy supervision of thesis thereby enabling the speedy completion of their studies on time, as well as provide an opportunity for students across the region to share experiences and information;
- Through the collaborative nature of the program, a regional- wide collaboration amongst teaching staff and researchers will be enhanced. This will be a boost to the search for solutions to challenges facing agricultural development in the region than was previously undertaken;
- The program is demand driven and this has been reflected in design stage, operation, and financing. The clients demand side has been involved in the planning phase to ensure that the program will tackle the existing problems facing the public and private sectors in agricultural development. Moreover, the program intends to involve stakeholders even as the program comes into operation o ensure that it retains its relevance and quality;
- The program will stress staff development through doctoral training and/or retooling, and learning to strengthen capacity in the participating departments. Many departments in the region have few qualified staff or are lacking. The program intends to alleviate this deficiency through provision of scholarships in areas of relevance to the program;
- There will be a shared facility where students will assemble during their third semester to undertake specialisation and elective courses. This will ensure there is harnessing of regional human expertise for the common good and allow students to interact academically;
- There will be cost effective application of national, regional and international human and financial resources to achieve program goals. This will be achieved though pooling human resources for a worthy course in advancing agricultural knowledge through teaching in the shared facility as well as through staff exchange programs;
- The approval process for any university to offer the course will be based on criteria and processes determined by AEEB. This will ensure that the quality and standards of the program are not undermined by lack of effective teaching personnel or equipment. Departments not qualifying for accreditation will be assisted to enable them initiate the program in the future;
- Program will create room for region wide networks for research and policy analysis dialogue and debates.

Admission Requirements

Admission into the program will require:

- Prior knowledge in mathematics encompassing differential and integral calculus; micro and macro economics; introductory course in statistics; computer skills; introductory course in accounting (for Agribusiness option) and proficiency in English. Deficiency in any of these requirements will require upgrading before official admission.
- Holders of a Bachelors degree in Agriculture, Agricultural economics, Science, Engineering, or Social sciences or professionals in mid career will be eligible for admission once prerequisites are acquired.

Program Components

The program will be undertaken in two years. Year 1 will comprise three semesters and year 2 will comprise 2 semesters. Each semester will be 15 weeks each. During the first two semesters, core courses will be offered in accredited home universities as follows: Semester 1 - Microeconomics, statistics, Mathematics and Issues in Agricultural and Applied Economics; Semester 2 - Production Economics, Econometrics, Macroeconomics and Research Methodology. During the same semesters students will be encouraged to identify and start working on a research topic for their thesis with the assistance of teaching staff.

During the third semester at the shared facility, students will take specialised fields of study and two elective courses. The electives will be based on thesis research interest and the student's advisor. Those in Agribusiness specialisation will take two required courses within the discipline giving them little flexibility in elective choices.

The second year comprising two semesters will be dedicated to research and writing of the thesis at the accredited home universities. During the two semesters, all students will complete a thesis whose supervision will be provided by a designated supervisor with the assistance of an additional thesis committee member, from within or outside the home university. Later on the students will be required to undertake an oral examination/defence of the thesis for examination.

After successful completion of all the required courses, thesis writing and defence, the home university will award the degree after the students gains a total of 45 credits.

Fields of Specialisation

Initially, four fields of specialised study will be offered with a possibility of additional ones, as demand will dictate. The four will include Agricultural Policy and Trade, Environment and Natural Resource Management, Agricultural and Rural Development, and Agribusiness Management. In each field, students will undertake the associated foundation course, thesis seminar and related electives. In addition, Institutional and Behavioural Economics will be mandatory for all fields of specialised study.

Curriculum for the Program

The AEEB recommended the establishment of Curriculum Development Teams to design the curriculum for the program. Eleven teams of consultants were selected and worked on the draft curriculum whose outcome was harmonized during a 2-days teams meeting in Nairobi. The Curriculum Development Sub-Committee then synthesized the draft curriculum before subjecting it to external review. External reviewers provided very positive comments and excellent suggestions that were incorporated in the curriculum. Consequently, the draft curriculum was approved by the AEEB for presentation to respective Senates for approval.

Program Implementation

The program will be launched in September 2005 upon availability of sufficient funds to cover projected capital and operating costs for the first 3 years. It is anticipated that the enrolment of first cohort of students in the AEEB accredited departments will be possible owing to the willingness to pay portrayed during the National Consultative Workshops. It is also anticipated that through cost sharing mechanism, program sustainability will be achieved.

There are excellent Prospects that the program will be housed by African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) from April 2005, pending its establishment as a legal entity.

Return to Investment

It is anticipated that effective implementation and successful operation of the collaborative masters program will add value in the region to justify its existence and costs incurred. Some of the positive returns to investment to be realised will include the fact that its graduates will be employed in various pursuits in the region contributing to Agricultural and rural development and thus to economic growth & poverty reduction; the program will strengthen capacity for research and education; will strengthen collaboration across departments, with more effective use of past as well as future investment in highly skilled human resources and the development of a nascent but potentially effective local driven network for research and policy analysis; and enhance AEEB network as an effective 'Network of Excellence'.

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More information about the program can be accessed at the program's web site at:
www.agricultureconomics.net