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***‘Universities, Government and Social Engagement: Experiences in
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Introduction:

Today, universities in Southern Africa, and indeed many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, are experiencing something of a rebirth or renaissance – albeit tentatively and precariously - after decades of stagnation, under-development and crises. This paper will briefly sketch what I consider to be some of the salient new shifts taking place in the way African universities today are beginning to relate to governments, and more broadly state systems in sub-Saharan Africa; and the underlying changes in the forms of ‘engagement’ of universities with their economic and social habitat.

For a long time, ever since the end of the Second World War, African universities have been developed very close, often tightly regulated and dependant relations with their corresponding governments and ruling elites, particularly with regards to how they were controlled (governance) and funding. In recent years, this tradition of state dependence or ‘state-centric’ development appears to have been losing ground, in favour of much more open, dispersed and diffused modes of institutional development as many universities seek to locate their mandate, role and functions within a wider spectrum of social relations.

This diffusion of the university within a wider set of societal relations in turn seems to stem from a wider structural realignment within these societies - between state, economy and society - in the context of the twin pressures of globalization and democracy. As many African states moved to restructure many aspects of economic management, policy-makers also introduced higher education reforms which in effect gave significant strategic flexibility to universities to exercise their autonomy in society. If these external pressures, together with ‘state failure’ provided the main ‘push’ factors in propelling universities to embrace more autonomous roles in society, they were also being emboldened by the rise tide of democratic movements from ‘below’ in taking advantage of these new freedoms.

Today, many universities in sub-Saharan Africa are beginning to orbit within an increasingly diverse, discursive spectrum of relations – business organizations, cooperatives, NGO's, civic associations, women's groupings, foundations, etc. – through which they seek to realize their mandate objectives. This 'poly-centric' (as opposed to state centric) development model has been marked by a new wave of institutional activism by African universities seeking their sources of sustainability beyond patronage from ruling elites and political regimes.

However, these new social spaces are by no means value neutral and the choices made by leaderships offer both exciting opportunities for sustainable development as they present difficult trade-offs and dilemmas. If the exclusive *raison d'être* for social engagement is revenue, this may well help 'third-stream' university income (to augment state subsidies), but it may also circumscribe or condition the types of partnerships institutions tend to privilege. Secondly, if universities engage with their local habitat for reasons of gaining legitimacy or relevance, they may, as is the experience of many universities in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, work successfully with local actors in creating 'social capital', strengthen democracy and use knowledge to improve quality of life in local communities; but if this is built on narrow local political allegiances, electoral shifts from one to another party may compromise the strategic autonomy of the university.

What is clear is that the new context of engagement of the post-1990's in sub-Saharan Africa is decidedly more complex, diffuse and multi-polar than at any previous time in history. In the new context, there may be no neat or easy choices for universities to take in embracing new opportunities. It may be possible to building strong, mutually-rewarding alliances from below with local communities and social interests, but for this to be sustainable requires a framework appropriately supported by a cohesive partnership involving government, university, investors and relatively skilled local community institutions.

1. Changing Nature of Universities-Government Links in Sub-Saharan Africa:

In broad terms, it is possible to distinguish three (3) periods in the history of University-Government relations in much of sub-Saharan Africa - colonial-era universities; early post-independence 'developmental' universities; and 'neo-developmental' universities. Each period reflected markedly different dynamics in relation to how universities related to the governments, how they were funded and how they engaged with the wider social habitat.

1.1. Colonial-era University-Government Relations:

Historically, most of sub-Saharan Africa's universities (with the exception of a few, such as Fort Hare, Makerere in Uganda and Ibadan in Nigeria) have been formed during the latter half of the twentieth century, in the aftermath of colonial rule. Most were constituted on the so-called British 'liberal arts' college model, whose basic constitutional elements, such as Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, senate, council, faculty

hierarchies, and dominant modes of knowledge production (centered in the curriculum) can still be found, with variations, in many present-day institutions. Despite independence, and major shifts in policy of many post-colonial governments, there has been a remarkable continuity of many of these traditions.

Most of the 'early' universities were established from private, mainly missionary church and philanthropic sources. It was only in later years, when state building became a policy priority in British colonial Africa that colonial governments began to provide funding to, and eventually asserting influence over universities. But the relations were largely at arms length, with no direct control over the internal affairs of these institutions in most countries.

Colonial-era universities were 'elite' institutions both in their demographic character and social disposition. In the first instance, they catered for relatively small numbers - in areas deemed necessary for preparing indigenous elites for different roles in colonial administrations (teachers, civil servants, etc.). In the second instance, they had limited involvement in local communities as they focused on classical roles mainly to do with teaching. Where they did have linkages with their surrounding environment, this tended to be restricted to supporting colonial mining companies (eg. first engineering schools at Wits and Cape Town universities in early 1900's) or organized agriculture. But these linkages were decidedly corporate and ethnocentric.

1.2. Post-Colonial Government-University Relations:

In the great period of decolonisation after World War 2, newly independent African governments looked upon universities in their countries for supporting post-independence development goals. In Tanzania, for example, the University of Dar es Salaam was drafted into supporting Julius Nyerere's policy of Ujamaa ('self-reliance'); in Mozambique, the MPLA enlisted Eduardo Mondlane University into massive teacher training and agricultural programmes in support of Frelimo's socialist policies; and similarly, in Zimbabwe, after 1980, ZANU-PF embarked on a major drive in support of its policy of 'Education With Production', with the University of Zimbabwe.

The major strength of many of these political shifts has been the effort to break away from the elitist orientations of the colonial university and achieve greater strategic articulation of the African university with its habitat. At an academic level, the new political climate also spawned exciting new disciplines; for example, 'development studies' at the University of Dar es Salaam in the late 1960s; 'development economics' at the UEA (later known as Makerere) in the early 1970s; 'development sociology' at Eduardo Mondlane and 'alternative education' at the University of Zambia around the same period. These institutions, for a period, achieved considerable international acclaim in scholarly circles, drawing students and staff from all parts of the world.

In their strategic orientation, these universities developed quite close ties with ruling party officials in governments. In many cases, governments directly appointed university Vice-Chancellors, members of council, with heads of state often presiding as

Chancellors. However, the major weakness of the post-colonial ‘model’ was that it tied universities too closely to, often in largely subordinate relationships with, the state. Over time, governments began to exert progressively more direct control, through funding, staffing appointments, dictating curriculum choices, and in some worse cases (e.g. Makerere under the Idi Amin regime of the 1970s), stifling innovation and discouraging critical discourse. In addition, these institutions did not enjoy wide ranging links with, and support from, thriving civil societies and economies beyond the state. Thus, with the onset of economic decline in the late 1970s, and major fiscal problems in many countries, universities were largely trapped in their over-dependence on the state and lack of independent and external economic linkages.

In South Africa, political freedom came much later, and evolved within the context of a more complex and industrially advanced economy and civil society than many other parts of the African continent. However, many of the same constitutional features were retained from the colonial period, and apart from the racially-stratified nature of the higher education sector, universities were tightly regulated by the apartheid state until its eventual demise in the early 1990’s.

1.3. Present Day Government-University Relations:

The beginning of the 1990’s marked the onset of major structural changes in the world economy, its trading systems, modes of communication (particularly, the pervasive internet and associated technologies) – a series of changes collectively often referred to as ‘globalization’. These changes profoundly changed the rules of international trade and communication, and directly began to influence the positioning of Africa’s economies within the global industrial and trading systems.

During much of the 1980’s, many countries in sub-Saharan Africa were under severe pressure from the IMF and World Bank, egged on by western countries, to restructure their economies, and with this, limiting public spend on higher education, in favour of basic and secondary education. Although this view was highly problematic, and was reversed by the very same lending institutions in later years, it did preside over a long period of institutional decline of universities – ageing infrastructure, loss of highly qualified staff to the north, dropping of quality teaching standards, and lack of funding for students. With the onset of globalization, the effect of these pressures magnified as government funding to universities fell behind real running costs. ‘State failure’, itself exacerbated by external policy pressures, in effect created a new context for redefining university-government relations.

At around the same time, southern Africa was experiencing a major resurgence of pressures from within civil societies for democratic reform. The catalyst for this movement was in South Africa where, after a long period of political instability, the apartheid system finally collapsed to make way for the first democratically elected government in 1994. The onset of democratic rule in South Africa in turn triggered off a chain reaction of pressures for democratic reform in many post-independent states such as Zimbabwe, Namibia, Zambia, Lesotho, Swaziland, Malawi, etc. It spawned major

electoral shifts in some of these countries, with this, introduction of major economic and social policy reforms.

In South Africa, the new democratic government embarked on major policy reforms in higher education from around 1994 aimed at re-integrated the fragmented system, fostering increased access and quality, as well as introducing new forms of governance of universities. The dominant mode of regulation of universities shifted away from the earlier direct political controls in favour of indirect 'steering mechanisms' such as funding, planning and quality assurance. In the new dispensation, the 'autonomy' of universities was enshrined in the new constitution (1995), thus placing their regulation beyond direct interference from government. As such, universities are regarded, and largely function, as self-regulatory institutions, retaining control over appointments of their Council, senior management and day to day operations.

Nonetheless, 'steering mechanisms' such as funding, quality assurance and planning have been used in a number of efforts by the new government to achieve its policy objectives such as de-racialization, re-integration, rationalization, improvement of internal efficiencies and outputs (teaching and research productivity). These policy aims are, in my view, quite laudable and progressive insofar as they seek to overcome the legacies of more than a century of 'racial' fragmentation and under-development. And there is a considerable amount of evidence of significant advances in the social transformation of South Africa's higher education landscape if measured in terms of access, de-racializing of institutions and transparent governance, though this has not necessarily been accompanied by major improvements in output and quality.

In essence, the post-1990's was marked by two powerful pressures - democracy and globalization - exerting itself on universities to redefine their nature and role in society. These pressures, it seems, worked in both complimentary and contradictory ways. At one level, pressures for democratization meant universities were expected to expand their horizons across ever-widening social spheres in promoting 'public good', whilst at the same time becoming more market-responsive, competitive, entrepreneurial and self-sustainable. At another level, democratization and globalization had the effect of 'liberalizing' the operating environment of universities - to advance their mandates through new social and technological networks (eg. public-private sector partnerships, internet-mediated learning, social knowledge-networks, etc.).

2. University Engagement in post-apartheid South Africa:

One of the striking features about higher education of the post-1990 period in South Africa, and many Southern African states has been the emergence of community or social 'engagement' as a core mission objective of most higher education institutions. This newly found prominence of the 3rd function of universities has been partly a response to government pressure, declining state subsidies and rising costs, and popular pressures 'from below'.

From 1994, the newly elected government exerted enormous pressures on universities to 'demonstrate' their relevance which many politicians did not see as 'self-evident' in the 1990's. They pointed to high drop-out rates, wastage and duplication, as well as instances of weak governance at many institutions. Whilst university leaders pointed to factors such as the failing schooling system, structural inheritances from the past and funding as reasons, there was considerable political pressure on them to demonstrate university public 'responsiveness'. Key government policy documents such as the White Paper on Higher Education Transformation of 1996 propagated the need for more robust and wide-ranging university engagement with their surrounding habitat.

Unfortunately, this call for an expanded social mandate was not accompanied by any major changes in public funding. Indeed, the first ten years since democracy saw a general decline (relative to costs) in university subsidies; ironically at a time when they came under growing pressure to 'engage'. Moreover, whereas the funding formula made provision for supporting university teaching and research functions, there was no state funding supporting community or social 'engagement' – even though this was accepted as a formal part of university mandates.

Furthermore, to date there is no public policy framework regulating the way in which universities engage with their habitat – i.e. setting out norms and codes of conduct, incentives and sanctions. This has been largely left to institutions themselves. As such, 'engagement' in South Africa is largely voluntarist and institutional as opposed to systemically-driven. This has had both positive and negative implications.

On the one hand, it created space for considerable institutional self-initiative and creativity in the way universities became involved in local communities in a whole array of different ways; with no single model adopted across the sector, and indeed even within single institutions. It also 'forced' institutions to find meaning within a wider spectrum of social institutions outside the realm of state control – including private sector, NGOs, civil society organizations, foundation, development agencies, etc. – and forging often innovative local and regional alliances. In many senses, universities have become far more socially-entrepreneurial than before; able to build university legitimacy beyond government within civil society; and also in many cases, generating additional revenue for their institutions.

On the other hand, the absence of a definite policy framework has meant that universities are left to their own devices in attempting to balance community or social 'engagement' with their teaching and research mandates. And although engagement should ideally be seen as an extension of teaching and research missions, in practice 'external' work does impose constraints on resources and time. And if funding subsidies only reward 'classical' teaching and research outputs (eg. peer reviewed publications), it tends to reduce the appetite of many academics to become involved in community-related projects. More worryingly, engagement without explicit public policy norms may lead to indiscriminate partnerships, with little or no clear connection with university teaching and research missions; and worse still, partnerships that may be in conflict with its public values.

The reasons put forward by universities for engagement are varied - the quest for new revenue (third-stream income), legitimacy, relevance, expansion of their core mandates into society, and sometimes even alliance building.

If the objective of university engagement with local interests is revenue generation, its success has certainly not been unambiguously demonstrated by the experiences of the University of Fort Hare (UFH). Many of my other colleagues echo similar sentiments. Of all the projects that UFH has been engaged in over the past 10 years, only a handful has yielded generous financial returns for the university, and many of relatively short-term duration with operating budgets mainly providing for overhead costs, but little 'above the line' revenue. In many cases, projects are successfully carried out, but with very little infrastructure or long-term skills gains for the UFH.

If engagement seeks to demonstrate the legitimacy and relevance of the university in its environment, local community development initiatives have provided universities in South Africa platforms for constructing a wide range of innovative projects and programmes. In many cases the strength of these alliances has enabled universities to mobilise political support for their interests, whether for state funding or for lobbying purposes, as in the case of the recent 'merger' struggles for retaining the independence of universities. Such alliances are often constructed at local-town or city level, when university administrators need to secure co-operation of local politicians or municipal officials to support their institution's development. However, such alliances may also hold their own difficulties. For one thing, political power in public institutions may change hands, and this could potentially compromise the strategic independence of universities. Secondly, the imperative of securing political support in one instance may make university administrators reluctant to offend such interests through critical scholarship or public positions.

There is of course a correlation between the levels of state support for universities and the manner in which they tend to engage in society. If funding support from government to universities declines, or fails to keep pace with growth demands and rising policy and social expectations, this presents a strategic dilemma for universities. A failure to generate third-stream income will effectively consign them to institutional failure and irrelevance. But if they pursue engagement solely or predominantly with the objective of 'making money' (presumably to supplement core incomes), then the range of choices they would tend to make would be largely those offering financial rewards. These types of partnerships typically are located in the formal economy, and less so in rural areas, which lack sufficient capital concentrations. It thus becomes tempting for universities to privilege corporate-type alliances with the promise of generating income, above those alliances that, at best, act as a drag on resources and, at worst, run at a loss.

State failure (in supporting an expanded social mandate of universities) may well 'force' universities to enter into logics of engagement that would privilege corporate as opposed to social norms. If the burden of cost is increasingly shifted to institutions themselves, a trend that concerns many university leaders at present, then institutions may well become

more indiscriminate in how they generate ‘alternative’ income. And if dominant economic interests – large corporations and organised interests – provide opportunities, they may become hard to resist.

In my own view, limitations on state funding to public institutions may well prevent universities from entering into knowledge-laden alliances with other forms of social accumulation of capital – co-operatives, NGOs, civic organizations, non-profit development agencies, and poor communities. The resource networks that allow for sustainable engagement with these ‘alternative’ forms of social capital are typically not within the mainstream economy. Their support requires new forms of funding, partly built from below, and partly supported by progressive state intervention.

It may be possible for universities in distinctly rural and peri-urban habitats such as Fort Hare to construct ‘alternative’ models of ‘engagement’ that may have the possibilities of meeting their social (public) mandate in supporting democratic norms in society, whilst at the same time securing conditions of sustainability. This is not easy. The model would perhaps not be corporatist, but ‘developmental’. Such institutions would have to succeed in securing a comprehensive network of partnerships with a multiplicity of local actors – civic associations, NGOs, municipalities, development agencies, religious and cultural institutions, academics and professionals, etc. – in a long-term development plan, which would not only focus on the development needs of the university but also on development flows into the community.

This may be difficult to achieve without a number of other conditions kicking into place. Firstly, a progressive, outward-looking generation of administrators and academics committed to a different development path is needed. Secondly, there should be a strong and committed local municipality able to provide the leadership and support base for an expanded and sustainable ‘development compact’ with other actors, including the university. Thirdly, success would require a vibrant, organized and active civic sector, business and labour to bring diverse forms of social capital into the development equation. And finally, and crucially, for small towns and rural contexts where market conditions (investment, infrastructure, etc.) are low, developmental funding on terms acceptable to local communities.

Thank you.
