

RURAL-BASED UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTH AFRICA

Albatrosses or Potential Nodes for Sustainable Development?

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Paper prepared for the Environmental Management for Sustainable Universities
conference

Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico

June 9-11, 2004

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Abstract

The change of government in South Africa from an apartheid state to a democratic state ushered the advent of widespread changes in higher education. It became necessary to dismantle the architecture of the divided higher education system and to create a single, co-ordinated system of higher education. The intention was, among other things, to rationalize the system and to remove the racialized inequalities that existed among institutions. The other motivation was the need to adapt the higher education system to the imperatives of a fast-changing, technology-driven and information-based global system. A corollary of the latter was the promotion of high skills development and the provision of quality education especially in strategic areas.

The apartheid education system was characterized, on the one hand, by well-equipped urban-based historically white universities and poorly resourced rural-based historically black universities, on the other. The question that faced post-1994 policy makers was what to do with these poorly resourced institutions. One view advocated closure as they were seen as apartheid creations, and had suffered the most blatant form of under-resourcing, the consequence of which was generally an impoverished intellectual environment. The opposing view was that all institutions are apartheid creations that needed rehabilitation of one sort or another, and that selected rural-based universities can, similarly, be rehabilitated so they can contribute to the reconstruction and development of the country.

This paper will focus on how two selected rural-based universities can contribute towards sustainable development especially in their surrounding habitats. Based on the findings of a recent study of two rural-based universities, the study addresses the following questions: What conditions or policy frameworks exist that can engender a sustainable development trajectory? How can rural-based universities reconstitute themselves so they can become effective agents for sustainable rural development?

Keywords:

Rural based universities

Change agents

Universities and sustainable development

Historically black universities

Rural development

Introduction

A discussion of rural-based universities in South Africa, and whether they can become centers for sustainable development needs to be located within the context of the history of apartheid policies that also shaped the landscape of higher education in South Africa. To this end, the paper will discuss: (a) the apartheid origins of rural-based universities in South Africa; (b) debates on South Africa's growth and development paths and higher education restructuring; (c) perspectives on sustainable development in South Africa; and (d) the role of higher education in general and rural-based universities in particular within the sustainable development strategies of government. It argues that given the geopolitical origins and purposes which higher education in South Africa served, the new government strategies for sustainable development and the new proposals for mergers, provide rural-based universities an opportunity to play a meaningful role in South Africa's reconstruction and sustainable development program. This is based on the strategic location of these institutions in the rural hinterland of South Africa, government's higher education merger plan that is linked to the human resource development strategy of the country and expects all higher education institutions to play a role.

Apartheid origins of rural-based black universities

Rural-based universities are the progeny of the so-called apartheid policy of "separate development" and became institutionalized through the Extension of University Education Act of 1959. The Act formalized and entrenched racially segregated education in the tertiary sector. It became an important part of the broader 'divide and rule' strategy used to enforce racial and ethnic division. Blacks were further balkanized into different ethnic groups and each group was given "national" status and encouraged to develop a sense of venerated cultural insularity. Accordingly, the 1959 Act established ethnic universities situated in the rural hinterland (Nkomo, 1984).

The Extension of University Education Act of 1959 gave rise to five black university colleges: the University-college of the North based in Sovenga for the Basotho, Vhambanda and VaTsonga; the University of Zululand for Zulu-speaking people, and the

transfer of the University of Fort Fare to the Department of Bantu Education to provide higher education for Xhosa-speaking people; the University College of Durban (later called Durban Westville) for Indians; and the University College of Western Cape for Coloured people. Between 1976 and 1983 the state created numerous new higher education institutions leading to the expansion of higher education for blacks in the country. In 1976, the Medical University of Southern Africa (MEDUNSA) was established aimed at providing medical training for black students. In 1982 VISTA University opened, operating with a number of satellite campuses around black urban townships but with its administrative offices based in Pretoria. Badat (2002: 193) identifies the significance of MEDUNSA and VISTA as urban-based campuses signaling the belated acceptance by the state of a permanent urban African population in the "white" areas. Between 1977 and 1983 four universities were established in the so-called Bantustans¹, namely, the universities of Transkei (1977), Bophuthatswana (1979), Venda (1983), and Qwaqwa (1983). The latter was not granted "independent" status. All of these developed their own civil and administration structures that made apartheid one of the most racially/ethnically fragmented higher education system in the world.

University education was thus provided as a way to facilitate the training of the civil bureaucracy for these areas. However, it was ensured that these institutions were developed under white tutelage in accordance with the white supremacy ideology. Accordingly, the types of courses offered, the levels of funding, their administrative capacities and academic content were inferior to those offered at white universities. For example, they had poorly-stocked libraries and under-equipped laboratories. The teaching of mathematics and science was designed for the training of teachers rather than the production of scientists. Research training and production of knowledge was not part of the mandate of these institutions. The result was that most of these institutions produced professionals in public service in the fields of law, administration, education, health and religion.

¹ These Bantustans were granted "independence" that South Africa and a few of her allies recognized.

Bunting summarizes well the rationale for the establishment of these universities in pointing out that it was overtly political and instrumental; they were not established because of an academic need for institutions of the kind they became. They were instrumental institutions in the sense of having been set up to train black people who would be useful to the apartheid state, and political in the sense that their existence played a role in the maintenance of the overall apartheid socio-political agenda. Their "useful graduates" were primarily the black teachers required by the black school system and the black civil servants required by the racially divided civil service of the Republic of South Africa (Bunting, 2002: 74). Furthermore, the intellectual agendas of the historically black universities were set by their apartheid origins. In the early years their academic staff members tended to come primarily from their historically white-Afrikaans-medium universities, which functioned with instrumentalist notions of knowledge. These academics readily accepted an academic ethos with a strong 'training' focus and, in particular, a focus that placed little emphasis on the production of new knowledge or critical and analytical skills. As a consequence, few of the academics employed by these institutions believed it necessary to introduce research and post-graduate programs in these universities. The intellectual agenda of the institutions often became no more than that of the material taught in previous years at historically white Afrikaans-medium universities (Bunting: 2002:75-76).

The foundation of black universities on apartheid ideology, which promoted inequalities across racial groups, meant that these institutions also reflected the inequalities of the broader society. In summarizing some of these inequalities, the National Commission on Higher Education (1996) points to the highly stratified nature of the higher education sector in South Africa in terms of race and gender. The pattern was that the greater the prestige, status and influence particular positions had, the greater the extent to which white men dominated. For example, in 1990, 92% of the executive/administrative management members in higher education institutions were white (NCHE, 1996:38). These institutions were also poorly funded, resulting in profoundly impoverished intellectual cultures that still, to varying degrees, remain deeply steeped in their current incarnation. The funding formula which government used to fund universities was also

biased towards historically white universities and against black universities. This was particularly the case where the formula rewarded course offerings in the natural sciences which included life, physical and mathematical sciences, health care and health sciences, engineering, architecture and the agricultural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities group which includes all other disciplines, on the other. More funding was allocated to the former subject groups than to the latter, which perpetuated the practice of in-built inequalities between these two sets of institutions. These practices led to South Africa's higher education system being one of the most fragmented and highly unequal systems in the world.

Growth and development paths and restructuring of the higher education system

One of the challenges that the new government faced when it came to power in 1994 was the restructuring of the education system to make it equitable and non-racial. With the vested interests entrenched in higher education, restructuring the system was not to be easy. The restructuring of the system should be understood in the light of the quest by the post-apartheid government to rid its education system of the apartheid past. According to Jansen (2002), there was a past to be resolved through the creation of a single, coordinated system of higher education that purposively dissolve the racialized inequalities that exist among institutions.

But there was another motivation, though less pronounced in public policy discourse, and that was the need to incorporate the South African higher education system within a fast-changing, technology-driven and information-based global economy. It is in the *twin logics of the transition* that the rationale for mergers in higher education in South Africa must be understood: (1) the logic of resolving the apartheid legacy in higher education; and (2) the logic of incorporating the higher education system within the context of a competitive, globalized economy. These two concerns also constituted the basis on which debates about the future of black universities and their role in development was framed. The economic viability of these institutions has become powerful arguments used by critics. Under the post-apartheid order, the future of higher education institutions has

been linked to their role in future economic and development policy of government and the human resource strategy adopted.²

South Africa's incorporation into the world economy and the pressures for change resulting from political reforms led to a heated debate over economic policies. In this debate a consensus emerged that a national economic framework must contain some balance between reviving economic growth and improving redistributive equity. But differences remained over the relationship between these objectives and particularly over obstacles to sustaining improved economic growth. This led to the emergence of two broad approaches to resolve this issue. The first argued for a strategy of "growth through redistribution" of resources towards the historically disadvantaged majority of the population. In other words, a massive expansion to meet domestic demand for basic consumption goods and services would be kick-started by state provision of key items such as housing, transport, electrification and urban infrastructure, through wide-spread job-creation schemes. The second approach emphasized restructuring of the existing industrial base, aimed especially at a rapid increase in the export of manufactured goods, and more advanced processing of mineral resources (beneficiation) prior to export. Rather than being the center of growth strategy, redistributive programs such as job creation, housing and training schemes for marginalized communities would be financed from the 'dividend' of exported goods (NCHE, 1996:53-54).

This debate came to be characterized in terms of representing the two poles of equity on the one hand and development on the other. Those in support of equity argued that the levels of inequalities in society are such that in order to attain redistributive justice, accelerated redress, economic growth strategy should be driven by equity concerns. In this way, it was maintained that victims of apartheid would be able to benefit directly from government's redress and redistribution policies. Those in favor of development as the driver of economic growth argued that the economy could be boosted and not be

² It should be noted that under apartheid, universities had a similar mission; that is, to promote socio-economic development through human capital development. The crucial difference is that state policy was racially based with the lion's share of the resources allocated to white institutions of higher learning.

disrupted by policies that ensured that the economy remains globally competitive and benefits accruing from that would be redistributed to the general populace.

As it turned out, the South African government adopted a macro-economic strategy, the Growth, Equity and Redistribution" (commonly known as "GEAR") whose thrust, simply put, is to create a platform for growing exports and for promoting investor confidence. This has been seen in some circles as a neo-liberal strategy as it is premised on fiscal discipline, privatization and deregulation--an approach that results in lower social investment. The strategy emphasizes greater labor market flexibility and the importance of human resources development as a key element in a broad economic plan. This has implications for higher education as the key strategic sector in the production of the required human resources. Because of its reliance on unskilled labor in the past, the South African economy is characterized by a large surplus of unskilled labor in need of basic education and training. The NCHE noted that the scarcity of high level skills is hampering economic development as well as South Africa's competitiveness in the world economy, and that if it is to compete economically on the world stage, it will need an increasing number of competent, higher education trained professionals and knowledge workers with world-class skills to strengthen its enterprises. If South Africa is to build this necessary skills base many thousands of new or retrained professionals in the next generation must come from the black community (NCHE, 1996: 55)

A globally competitive economy depends on an industrial set-up that is characterized by continuous technological improvement and innovation. Such improvement and innovation are possible only where a well-organized, vibrant and interactive system of research and development agencies exist. Higher education institutions are major and indispensable contributors to and participants in such a system. The question that needs to be posed is: can rural based (historically black universities) play a role in such innovation and technological advancement for sustainable development especially in their generally underdeveloped habitats? The unfolding of events with preoccupations with growth and global competitiveness, seem to favor those institutions that already have capacity and expertise to play that role, and in the case of South African higher education system, that

expertise and resource are found in the urban-based (historically white) universities. In this case, rural-based universities seem to be disadvantaged again in this new set-up.

Debates concerning future economic growth also came to mirror the ways in which debates concerning the restructuring of the higher education system in South Africa were framed. The policy agenda highlighted the inequities of the higher education system and a commitment was made to address them. Whilst there was agreement on some of the features and principles of higher education, there was no unanimity over how to address some of the challenges. For example, with respect to ensuring that higher education addresses equity, quality and development goals, there were fierce debates about how these could be attained. One argument was that strategies designed to improve equity in higher education could lead in certain circumstances to a decline in the quality of the system, particularly if the demands of equity were taken to imply that all resource distribution in the system should be equalized. The problem with this argument may be that it could have an unacceptable effect on the socio-economic development of the country - high equity plus low quality could lead to low economic growth. Flowing from this perspective were therefore two central issues facing the higher education system:

- How could the demands for equity be made consistent with South Africa's need for a higher education system of higher quality?
- How could the development needs of the country be met if priority was given to the elimination of inequalities in the higher education system (NEPI, 1992:58)

The contestations tended to polarize higher education along racial lines with the historically white institutions (HWIs) favoring development and quality goals and the historically black institutions (HBIs) favoring the equity goals. This point is succinctly captured by Wolpe and Schoole, in pointing out that:

The argument has been advanced from the side of the HWIs that they should continue to be funded at certain levels because they embody teaching and research capacities required to develop the new South Africa, and from the side of the HBIs,

that funds should be shifted to them because they have been historically disadvantaged (Wolpe and Schoole; 1995:7).

According to Wolpe and Schoole, neither of these positions was acceptable in this form since, in one way or another, funding had to be attached to new redirected functions. Simply to fund the institutions in a manner which enabled them to perform better according to an agenda under a previous dispensation was, according to them, inadequate. The logic was therefore to fund these institutions in accordance with the development agenda pursued by government and the respective roles they were to play in it. This would therefore dissolve the racialized basis on which to fund them and link that to the broader mission higher education in the country was to play.

Developments since 1994 have contributed to these rural-based institutions suffering major setbacks. These institutions have since then suffered an exodus of highly skilled personnel and academics moving to join government, the private sector and historically white institutions as a result of better opportunities, which the latter presented (Potgieter, 2002). They have experienced a drop in student enrolments in what came to be known as “students voting with their feet” as black students started enrolling at urban-based historically white institutions with the historically white Afrikaans-medium universities and technikons being the main beneficiaries. The latter not only offered “better” training but also better prospects of securing a job upon completion of studies (Moleke, 2004). Government did not accept or implement the redress fund recommended by the Commission to kick-start the repositioning of these institutions.

Since 1999 government has embarked on a series of policy reform initiatives that might give historically black and rural universities a new lease on life, and an opportunity for contributing to sustainable development. These initiatives culminated in the approval of a merger plan by government aimed at transforming the landscape of higher education in the country. The racialized basis of funding has in some ways been tampered within the newly proposed merger plan of higher education institutions underway in South Africa.

Perspectives on sustainable development in the South African context

There are different perspectives and senses in which the concept of sustainable development is applied in the South African context, which is related to the history of the country. The first is sustainable development as it relates to the sustainability of the higher education institutions in terms of relevant program offerings, research and development. This conception emanates from the reality of a two-tier racially-segregated system of higher education with white, urban institutions intrinsically linked to the economic development of the country and therefore well funded; and black, rural institutions linked to the Bantustan system and therefore poorly resourced. With the dawn of the new era, coupled with the challenges and birth pains of transition, most black rural institutions were saddled with massive debts, which rendered them financially unsustainable and therefore threatened with the possibility of closure. It is a complex of disabilities that are inscribed in their genetic constitution that are behind the general perception that they are albatrosses that deserve riddance. The restructuring of the higher education system had, amongst other goals, to deal with the problem by setting them on a path towards sustainability.

The second conception of sustainability is more systemic and relates to laying a solid foundation in the restructuring of the higher education system. According to the National Working Group (NWG, 2001) report, sustainability of the system implies ensuring among other things that:

- Reconfiguration should strengthen the weak elements in the system and not weaken the strong;
- Every possible measure should be taken to secure the financial viability and stability of institutions;
- Each institution in the system should have a critical mass of academic, administrative and management capacity at its disposal, and that steps should be taken to build such capacity where it is lacking or inadequate (NWG, 2001:65).

The other form of sustainable development goes beyond the education sector and refers to the general socio-economic development aimed at better life for all South Africans. It combines multiple strategies aimed at ensuring that stable economic growth is linked to

eradication of apartheid's legacy of poverty and inequality. It combines direct poverty alleviation programs with broadening of social services and infrastructure: housing, electrification, social development, health, education, water, telecommunications, sport and recreational facilities. Eradication of poverty is viewed as fundamental to the restoration of the dignity of the majority of South Africa's people and a better life for all the citizens. All government departments in their respective delivery areas are expected to execute their tasks with this objective as one of their central points of reference. The priorities identified by the Department of Social Development include development and implementation of an integrated poverty eradication strategy that provides direct benefits for those who are in need, within a sustainable development approach (SAYB 2001/2: 53-54)

The South African government's approach to sustainable development is better enunciated in the Integrated and Sustainable Rural Development Strategy (ISRDS), which was unveiled by government in 2000. The elements of the vision behind this strategy help to elucidate the concept of sustainable development. The report explains the concepts 'rural development' and 'sustainability' in the following ways:

- Rural development: is multi-dimensional and much broader than poverty alleviation through social programs and transfers. It places emphasis on changing environments to enable poor people to earn more, invest in themselves and their communities and contribute toward maintenance of key infrastructure; a successful strategy will make people less poor, rather than more comfortable in their poverty.

- Sustainable: is derived from increased local growth, and where rural people care about success and are able to access resources to keep the strategy going.

The strategy document argues that it is designed to realize a vision that will:

...attain socially cohesive and stable rural communities with viable institutions, sustainable economies and universal access to social amenities, able to attract and retain skilled and knowledgeable people, who are equipped to contribute to growth and development... The strategy in its totality presents an opportunity for South Africa's rural people to realise their own potential and contribute more fully to their country's future (ISRDS, 2000: 4-5).

What is critical to the successful implementation of the ISRDS is the decentralization approach that is recommended on the basis of international experience that shows the failure of centralized development projects in the 1970s. South Africa is in an ideal position to take on board one of the key lessons of the international experience, namely, that successful rural development must be implemented in a participatory and decentralized fashion in order to respond to articulated priorities and observed opportunities at the local level. The reform of municipal government places organs of local government in a central role in integrating programs to achieve synergistic rural development. Many will need assistance and guidance to develop capacity, but their role and responsibilities are clearly established (ibid: 4-5). This approach is further supported by recent experiences in program design, which suggest that decentralization accompanied by promotion of greater local power and autonomy in decision-making can offer opportunities to improve outcomes. The evidence indicates that institutional capacity to meet the responsibilities and obligations of decentralized authorities must be created and nurtured; and a clearly defined system of incentives and penalties is required to contribute to more efficient investment decision-making and to discourage misuse of funds. Some complementary measures to support the ISRDS are:

- human resource development and capacity building;
- land reform;
- implementing the revised program;
- community based income generation projects;
- social assistance and safety nets; and
- rural finance (ibid: 8-9)

Restructuring of higher education

One of the first initiatives undertaken by the post-apartheid government was to develop legislative and policy tools aimed at transforming the higher education system in line with the vision of government. Amongst some of the policy tools developed were the White Paper 3 on Higher Education (1997) which outlines the program for the transformation of the system; the human resource development strategy document,

developed in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor to meet the socio-economic needs of the country, the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) which addressed the policy goals which higher education needs to address and how it will address them, the development of new institutional landscape documents which culminated in the adoption of the merger plan aimed at transforming the higher education system but also put in place the new institutional types in line with government's vision for transforming the system. What emerged out of these documents was a new conceptualization of the role higher education is to play in the local, regional and national development of the country that cuts across racial, ethnic, urban and rural divides. The role of higher education institutions is conceptualized and defined along regional and national development goals and no longer according to race and ethnicity as in the past.

In particular, the White Paper 3 on higher education proposed the creation of a single coordinated system of higher education that is planned, governed and funded as a single system. This was underpinned by two related factors:

- The need to overcome apartheid-induced fragmentation, inequalities and inefficiencies, which distorted the development of the higher education system and its ability, knowledge, human resource, social and economic needs of the country.
- The challenge of reconstruction and development in the context of globalization and its impact on knowledge and skills development, as well as on the world of work. These challenges require the system to produce graduates equipped with appropriate skills and competencies to ensure that there is adequate provision of high-level human resource skills to meet the changing needs of the South African economy and society (Education White Paper, 1997: 17).

The White Paper 3 also argued that the goal of a single coordinated system requires an assessment of an optimal number and type of institutions needed to ensure a higher education system which is, on one hand, affordable and sustainable and, on the other, able to contribute effectively to social and economic development.

To this end, the National Plan for Higher Education, which was released in March 2001, provides the implementation framework for achieving the White Paper's vision of a single national co-ordinated higher education system that is affordable, sustainable and which is responsive and contributes to the human resource and research needs of the country. Some of the policy goals and strategic objectives it outlines include:

- (a) Increasing access and to produce graduates with the skills and competencies necessary to meet human resource needs of the country
- (b) Ensuring diversity in the institutional landscape of the higher education system through mission and program differentiation to meet national and regional skills and knowledge needs.
- (c) Building high-level research capacity, including sustaining current strength, as well as to promote research linked to national development needs.
- (d) Building new institutional identities and organizational forms through restructuring the institutional landscape of the higher education system (National Plan for Higher Education, 2001: 14).

Education in general, and higher education in particular, is accorded a central role in human resource strategy development aimed at reducing apartheid inequalities and contributing towards poverty eradication and sustainable development. The Education Ministry has pursued this challenge with great determination. In March 2001, the Minister of Education appointed the National Working Group to advise him on the restructuring of the institutional landscape of higher education system; to propose the appropriate arrangements for restructuring the provision of higher education on a regional basis through the development of new institutional and organizational forms, including institutional mergers and rationalization of program development and delivery. . The NWG's main consideration was the role and capacity of the higher education system in the long-term to meet the human resource and knowledge needs of the country.

The Potential to become centers for Sustainable Development

One intriguing contradiction of the legacy of apartheid planning and rationale is that flowing from the restructuring of higher education institutions and program rationalization, what was regarded as wastage and duplication under apartheid, has the possibility of becoming a resource for sustainable development in a new South Africa. In making recommendations for institutional reconfiguration, the NWG identified the strengths and weaknesses of each institution and suggested what it deemed as an appropriate role each institution is to play in the new context.

For the purpose of this paper focus will be on the status of rural-based universities, namely, the universities of Fort Hare and the North, which came into existence as black universities under the apartheid's Extension of University Education Act of 1959.

The two institutions are being retained under the new reconfigured landscape, albeit in different forms. With respect to the University of Fort Hare, the Ministry of Education rejected the NWG's recommendation for the merger of Fort Hare with Rhodes University, but rather for it to be retained as a separate institution incorporating the East London campus of Rhodes University and the Health Sciences of the Faculty of the University of the Transkei (another rural university). Fort Hare is going to focus on expanding access in the East London area, which is in line with the designation of East London as an industrial development zone in the Provincial Government (DOE 2002(a): 10). The NWG had indicated that the evidence suggests that growth in higher education in the region will be centered in the East London area since this is where the population is growing.

The University of the North, based in Limpopo Province, is to merge with one other university: the Medical University of Southern African, which provides medical training for black people. The NWG suggests that such a merger would result in an institution with the basis and the potential for a wide and comprehensive range of vocational, technological and professional training and of general and formative education. Each institution is expected to gain from these merger proposals. It is recommended that MEDUNSA (an institution specializing in the health sciences) should orient its vision and mission deliberately to the Limpopo Province (one of the most impoverished provinces)

and other rural regions and help to bring about a strong health science and health service program in these areas through co-ordination and consolidation with nursing, pharmacy and optometry courses at the present University of the North and with related programs at the University of Venda. The NWG further proposed that all nursing and agricultural training should be incorporated into the new institution. This would, on the one hand, take advantage of these training programs, and on the other, strengthen the career-focused component of the proposed new university's mission and educational profile. It was also recommended that gradual introduction of more certificate and diploma programs and short courses, as well as other technikon-type qualifications so that vocational and technological needs of the region can be met also. The analysis undertaken by the NWG suggests that with the merger of these three institutions once concluded could produce a new multi-campus institution with a sustainable size of about 16 000 head count enrolment (compared to 6000, 3000, 3000 respectively) found presently in the three separate institutions. The program profile would most probably meet the required balance between the different categories (Science and Technology, business/management, education and humanities), unlike the exclusively humanities and social science orientation inherited from the apartheid era; and between the different kinds of educational goals (sub-degrees skills-training, vocational, professional, general formative), in keeping with the National Plan for Higher Education (NWG, 2001: 44)

Firstly, the proposals of the NWG and the Department of Education's merger plan have not only given rural universities a new lease on life, but have put them on an historic growth path which, for the first time since their establishment, provides them with an extraordinary opportunity to link their missions and roles to economic and industrial development of their immediate communities. Secondly, the diversity of program offering will also enable them to develop programs that will enable them to play a role in rural development. The ISRDS's decentralization approach enables the institutions to direct their work towards rural development aimed at building local social capacity. With these universities located in the rural hinterland, there will be no need to build new infrastructure where training of the required human resources should take place. They are

strategically located to play a catalytic development role. Being linked to rural and industrial development nodal points in their respective regions, there will be opportunities for synergistic partnerships with local businesses, civic bodies, industry, local and provincial governments thus contributing to meaningful socio-economic growth and development.

The four complementary measures identified in the ISRD namely: land reform; implementing the revised program; community based income generation projects; social assistance and safety nets; and rural finance pose a challenge for universities to be responsive by developing programs that will address these needs. This does not suggest that these institutions should adopt an instrumentalist approach towards development, but to adopt comprehensive innovative strategies whereby teaching programs have inbuilt research components with appropriate monitoring and implementation capabilities that will turn them into local and regional assets.

The regional/provincial rationale applied in the restructuring and merger plan forces local business, provincial government departments and civic bodies to use these local institutions if they are to contribute to provincial revenue and capacity generation. As pointed earlier, this plan encourages approaches that cut across racial and ethnic divides. In instances where in the past, white businesses, provincial governments and local municipalities would look for research support and innovation from former white institutions located outside their provinces, now they would have to look locally for that kind of support.

These new opportunities further present new challenges for these institutions. The research conducted by the HSRC [Nkomo and Maja, 2004] shows that the University of the North and the University of Fort Hare have not taken sufficient steps to take advantage of new opportunities presented by the new context. These new opportunities offer rural-based universities the ability to also unlock themselves from their spatial isolation (through effective employment of technology--a la U of N Scotland H & I and Chandigarh Rural University) and to reconnect with their immediate communities and

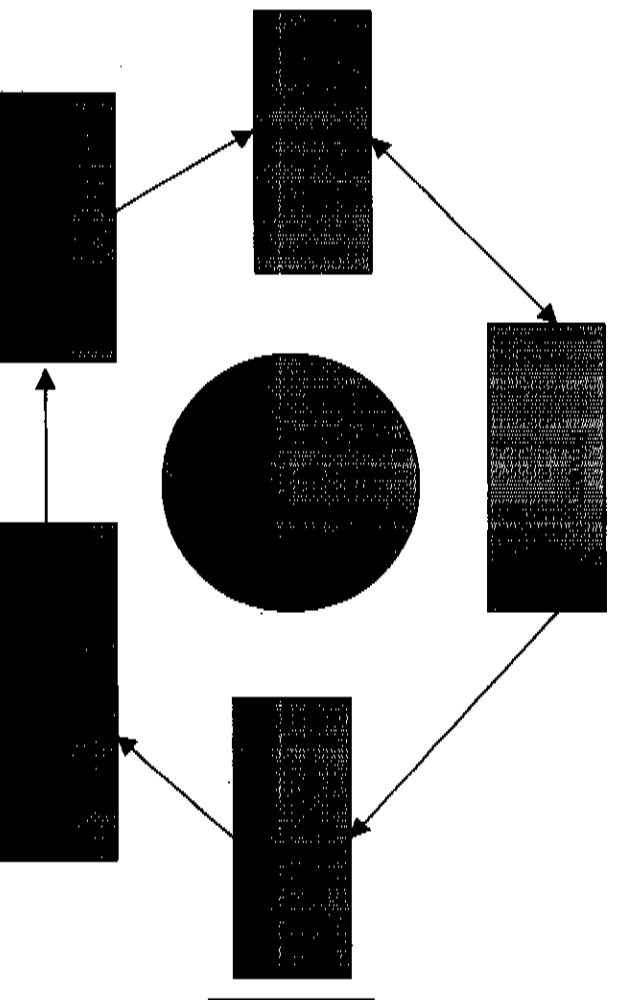
broader society. The panacea is the adoption of a development vision and ethos; an entrepreneurial spirit that can reinvent the institutions through welding the various critical elements such as infrastructure, intellect, social capital and technology with local needs and knowledge systems. Their location gives them an extraordinary advantage to infuse sustainability into rural development and serving as the integrative tissue.

In the following section we present three graphic representations of the traditional posture of the rural universities in South Africa and the possibilities offered by the legislative and policy frameworks that can help unleash their intellectual and creative energies.

The Albatross or Static Condition

The rural sector has historically suffered gross neglect from central governments whose locus is invariably located in urban centers. Because of the urban bias the rural sector has not enjoyed the same degree of interest, effort and investment as its urban counterpart. Universities have suffered the same fate. In such circumstances the university is virtually nonexistent as far as its surrounding habitat is concerned. Diagram A illustrates the parlous nature of this condition.

Diagram A: The Static or Albatross Condition



The static university does not produce any meaningful intellectual energy to kindle sustainable. In other words it is indifferent, consciously or unconsciously, to its immediate environment. An environment of abject poverty and hopelessness surrounds it. Illiteracy is endemic and has an erosive effect on the quality of rural life. There is a high correlation between poverty and illiteracy; in turn illiteracy leads to high rates of unemployment; the latter leads to lower productivity; and in turn, suppressed productivity yields a lower GDP. This is the vicious cycle that characterizes the rural condition. In this situation the university is an albatross.

The Dynamic Condition

But it is now immensely possible for the rural-based universities to be able to overcome their albatross condition. Through the policy instruments the requisite conditions now exist for turning them into engines of sustained development. The vicious cycle illustrated above can be converted into a dynamic emancipatory culture.

Diagram B: The Dynamic Catalytic Condition

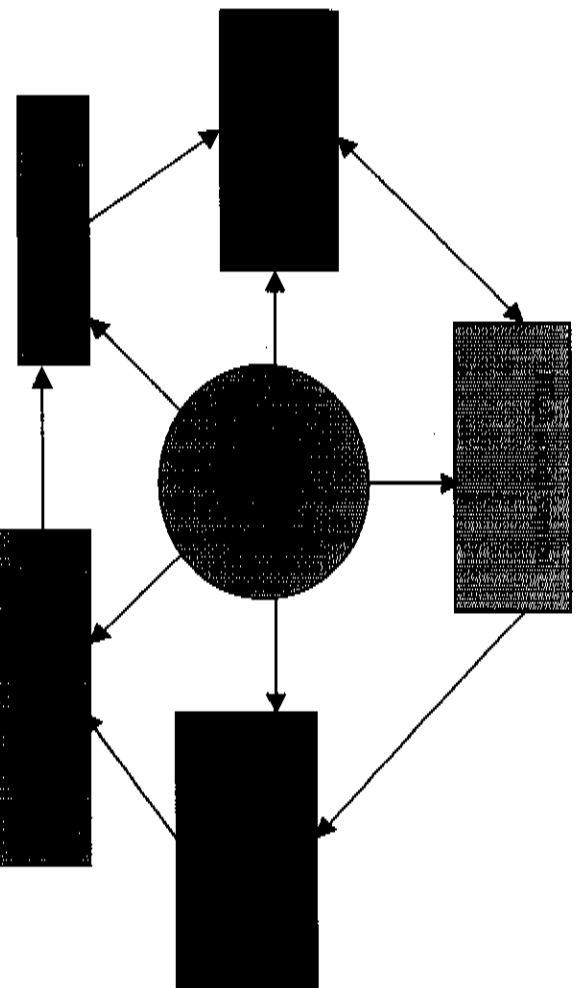


Diagram B situates the university at the center of the rural community where it endeavors to interact with the community in a meaningful way. Through active engagement with the community of institutions the university can contribute significantly to the building of social capital that can sustain development over time to benefit future generations. It can raise literacy through its core activities as a learning center resulting in high social capital, high literacy and social capital increase prospects of employability (including self employment); leading to high productivity and a higher GDP; leading to higher standards of living and an improved quality of life and social well being.

The Dynamic University and Stakeholder Interactive Model

It all culminates in diagram C below. Diagram C is a more elaborate rendition of diagram B and seeks to convey the idea that sustainable development is multidimensional. It lends itself to the view that education is one amongst many levers capable of unleashing the full potential of each individual and, by extension, of the society as a whole; in this case, especially that of the rural community. Universities acting in isolation cannot activate the full range of potentials embedded in their immediate community or society at large unless they act in concert or in dynamic partnership with other institutions thus generating synergies that are capable of arousing the collective potential within a broad-based, mutually-supportive social infrastructure.

Diagram C: Dynamic University and Stakeholder Interaction



The above should be situated within the framework of the NPHE and ISRD policy instruments.

In sum, for the rural universities to be able to play a catalytic role in sustainable development of the rural sector they should take the following into consideration:

Rural development

Rural development should be understood to include the improved provision of services, enhanced opportunities for income generation and local economic development, improved physical infrastructure, social cohesion and physical security within rural communities, active representation in local political processes, and effective provision for the vulnerable. Therefore, *rural development in this context is thus much broader than poverty alleviation through social programs and transfers.*

There is a dire need to resuscitate the rural economies as potential engines of economic growth that would contribute towards their own development and the broad national development agenda. A strategy to achieve growth must be founded on an understanding of how rural areas grow. Growth in agriculture, tourism, forestry, and other primary activities generates additional incomes through linkage in expenditure and employment. For example, agricultural growth generates demand for inputs and the retailing activities associated with delivery. Also, natural resources will always be an important determining factor in rural development, as these may be the only resources that some rural areas are endowed with.

Sustainability

The strategy will be sustainable to the extent that it contributes to increased local growth, that rural people care about its success, and are able to access the resources to keep it going. Thus, sustainability implies effective community participation to assure that the projects and activities undertaken respond to articulated priorities at the local level.

Integration

Finally, integration should be the goal of sustainable rural development programs. Simply put, the success of sustainable development depends on welding together a variety of players in the sector in order to generate the necessary synergy that can be sustained for the benefit of posterity (Nkomo and Maja, 2004: 122-124).

The rural-based universities are advantageously situated and possesses a variety of characteristics as shown below:

- Strategic location within the rural community;
- Existing physical infrastructure (no need to build additional physical capital—consider multiple usage);
- Existing and potential intellectual capital (with mission reorientation as a precondition including application of appropriate development paradigm, enhancement of research);
- Possess potential to promote development of social capital;
- Possess potential to promote appropriate and relevant teaching and learning methodologies; and
- Possess potential to build strong collaborative relationships (partnerships) based on ‘community of trust’ notion (involving university, community, business, government, etc.)

A critical factor is the transformation of the mindset: that is, to encourage the development of attitudes, values and ethics that will serve as the fundamental core undergirding sustainable development. In this sense these institutions can help “increase[s] the well being of the current generation, while preserving the options available to future generations” (NEPAD, 2001, 13).

Conclusion

An enabling environment now exists for the possibilities to be realized: there is a democratic dispensation that allows for academic freedom, unfettered creativity and innovation; a legislative and policy framework; technology that can break the spatial isolation; and the vision to harness indigenous knowledge systems and the creation of trust among all the stakeholders. These conditions constitute the foundation for the

conversion of the rural-based universities from being albatrosses to being catalytic agents of sustainable development.

Liabilities inherited from the past can, through ingenuity, be converted into assets and renewal currency. Commitment to intellectual revival and development are needed to transcend the formerly crippling spatial isolation. Application of appropriate technological expertise, harnessing indigenous knowledge and political will are the critical ingredients to the revitalization of these institutions. Their survival deserves no less.

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¹ These Bantustans were granted "independence" that South Africa and a few of her allies recognized.

¹ It should be noted that under apartheid, universities had a similar mission: that is, to promote socio-economic development through human capital development. The crucial difference is that state policy was racially based with the lion's share of the resources allocated to white institutions of higher learning.

www.nepad.org/documents/nepad_english_version.pdf

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