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COMMENTARY

Universities as agents of prosperity

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University education and technological innovation hold the key to address global challenges. African countries can learn from experiences around the world to make their universities agents of prosperity.

The current world population is calculated at 6.35 billion and according to United Nations projections, in three years we will be 7 billion; in 2025, 8 billion and in 2050, there will be 9 billion of inhabitants on the planet.

The search for strategies to feed and provide water for this population should be of vital importance in order to avoid and prevent major catastrophes. Currently, millions of people are undernourished, most of them in Africa.

Hunger is not just a consequence of poverty, but rather one of its causes and puts at risk the productivity of people, families, communities and entire nations.

This challenge is compounded by an alarming decrease in available crop land and the hope of many countries—including China and India—to reach a standard of living of the first world, which will exponentially increase the demand for food, energy, water and forestry resources.

But there is a hopeful side to the equation. Technological innovation is an alternative toward which we should focus our efforts. Technologies exist that promise to lower costs and increase the quality and quantity of our productive activities all with a greater attention to environmental sustainability.

Tropical biological diversity is also a resource that deserves greater research and new and effective technologies can successfully be adapted to small-scale production and commercial agriculture. The challenge is for universities to adopt and apply this new perspective in their programmes so that they can serve the needs of humanity directly.

African countries and the developing world at-large should seek to transform themselves from being producers of primary materials to adding value to products. Universities should be promoting a new economic model for agriculture where waste is converted into commercial products, where carbon sequestration becomes a marketable service.

We know that there are great advances, but we should achieve much more. Access to knowledge is very important and it is imperative that education reaches the greatest number of people, particularly young people from economically disadvantaged families.

It is our duty as universities, to form the new leaders that the world requires to achieve transformations. These leaders have to be educated in a holistic way. They should have strong ethical values and understand the urgency of prosperity and justice. These leaders should be sensitive to the current reality, to the real problems that face the world, and should be equipped to offer practical solutions that permeate all sectors of society.

Academic institutions have to be protagonists in change. We have to convert education into the axis of development and promote peace and democracy.

Costa Rica, which shares commonalities with many African nations in terms of climate and resources, has been privileged to have visionary leaders who have understood the importance of education and since 1949 has had a free and mandatory educational system through elementary school. In this same era, the army was abolished, arms were exchanged for books and canons for school desks and state universities offering a world-class education were established. Costa Ricans are very proud of this.

This investment has had visible results as Costa Rica is a stable country. The formula is really simple: if we invest in education, we won't have to invest in arms. If we invest in education, we invest in life, not in death. We invest in peace and not in war.

Universities have the opportunity to build and share knowledge and create the energy needed to generate profound transformations. The international community needs to support such efforts.

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