

Transforming Africa’s Research-for-Development Ecosystem








Participants in a University Research Engagement and Capacity Strengthening Workshop in Kampala, Uganda, work together through challenges and potential solutions related to African university engagement in development work. Photo by Chris Rice

**KEY FINDINGS OF SYNDICATE
GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

The United States Agency for International Development and governments in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) can address key issues involving universities in development research projects by prioritizing sustainable funding; academic infrastructure support; alignment with universities in future work; and capacity strengthening for leadership, staff, and faculty that drives changes in academic culture. These were the findings of a workshop in Uganda that featured 79 academic leaders and researchers from 11 countries in SSA and 11 participants from the United States. Participants worked in four discussion groups to identify (1) challenges for higher education institutions and (2) potential action items for learning and application. Upon presentation of the findings and the subsequent synthesis and validation with group chairs and rapporteurs, an early outcome of this workshop is key gaps in and action items for the research ecosystem, which USAID and governments in SSA can incorporate into future project designs that involve higher education institutions (HEIs), across sectors.

**KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
DONORS AND GOVERNMENTS**

 ISSUE SUSTAINABLE FUNDING	 SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT	
 STRENGTHEN CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES	 ENCOURAGE ALIGNMENT WITH HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS	 INCENTIVIZE CHANGES IN ACADEMIC CULTURE

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LASER (Long-term Assistance and Services for Research) PULSE (Partners for University-Led Solutions Engine) is a \$70 million program funded through USAID’s Innovation, Technology, and Research Hub, that delivers research-driven solutions to field-sourced development challenges in USAID partner countries.

With USAID's increasing shift toward localization in development projects, such institutions can better engage in development. Despite the beneficial role HEIs can play in development by combining research rigor with local context, these institutions face many challenges in effectively engaging in research for development, many of which USAID and SSA governments can seek to address when issuing funding for these institutions. These challenges include: (1) Limited financial support; (2) Limited infrastructure; (3) Insufficient staff and faculty capacity to respond to funding opportunities; (4) weak relationships and alignment with end users; and (5) an academic institutional culture and incentives structure that deprioritizes research and development work, and grants opportunities and credit to too few junior staff and women.

The following recommendations detail key opportunities for HEIs governments to overcome these gaps in future funding.



Recommendation 1: Issue Sustainable Funding Models

Funding to support research is critical to engage HEIs in development. However, these institutions often possess limited financial support for research projects, and have concerns about the sustainability of funding and potential funding gaps in development research. To help promote longer-term relationships and sustained researcher engagement for development, USAID and governments should consider sustainable funding models rather than short-term projects. These funding packages could help empower women, junior faculty, and younger or smaller institutions by targeting funding toward them, opening up opportunities to learn from larger institutions, and issuing small grants to support mentorship and capacity strengthening.

Targeting early career and female researchers with funding opportunities and capacity strengthening presents an opportunity to transform the research ecosystem toward a more sustainable and impactful model in the long term.



Recommendation 2: Support Physical and Organizational Infrastructure Needs for Long-Term Research Investment

Many institutions in SSA, particularly the younger institutions, have infrastructure support needs. In terms of physical infrastructure, access to technology and equipment for newer research trends, such as digital approaches and data mining, and limited laboratories inhibit researchers' work. Many HEIs lack research coordinating units to leverage resources and expertise across disciplines, as well as units that could support research translation in terms of leveraging stakeholders for early engagement, uptake, and scale.

On the front end of research funding, streamlining the research process on the donor's side and supporting institutions in their efforts to overcome cumbersome bureaucracy could improve the efficiency of administrative and financial systems. Investing in physical and technological infrastructure will enable institutions to operate at a higher capacity for research funding. Also, USAID and governments should support the creation of coordinating units to promote transdisciplinary research; and research coordination hubs to manage research, networks, and evidence, and support translation into practice.



Recommendation 3: Strengthen Staff and Faculty Capacity to Respond to Funding Opportunities

While funding and infrastructure would assist researchers with strong skill sets, many HEIs need development in terms of proposal writing, research translation and dissemination, time management, and research administration. This extends from faculty to administrative staff: faculty could utilize assistance in the packaging of technical information for lay audiences, and staff in streamlining research administration. Enhanced structures, systems, and supporting units within institutions through training would enhance their abilities to effectively respond to donor requests. Indeed, delays caused by ethical approval and clearance, mobilization of resources through donors and HEIs, and bureaucratic systems are exacerbated when faculty and staff do not possess the proper skill set and systems. To build capacity for HEIs and researchers to respond to calls effectively, USAID and government should target early career and female researchers and grant management offices with training in the research process, research translation, and communications, and work to develop research mentorship programs.



Recommendation 4: Enhanced Linkages with Donors and Research End Users

HEIs face issues with relationships with end users. Many have weak relationships with donors and do not have policymakers involved in their work. Also, some policymakers do not believe research applies to them. Ministries in particular do not translate research on their own. Where these relationships are weak, alignment and linkages are weak between government development strategies and university research priorities. This mismatch leads to research that is not relevant to government priorities. Policies and guidelines for development research only exacerbate these mismatches. Intellectual property considerations, operational procedures and overhead allocation differences, and limited donor support for administration as well as research uptake further misalign government and research. Moreover, academics and donors face issues in an imbalance of cost versus rigor. Academics primarily focus on rigor, which can take time and money, especially in the case of patenting, while donors prefer cost-effective, “good enough” results that are produced swiftly.

Working with HEIs and their leadership early to align research efforts with development priorities will ensure the research undertaken is relevant and contextual to current needs. Collaborative efforts to define research priorities at the national level and align with institutional priorities helps ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the research process and sets best practices for future active engagement.

In this research, supporting transdisciplinary, international, and community-engaged research partnerships will promote effective research translation. Promoting cross-border partnerships with more established HEIs helps provide access to IRBs, improves the likelihood of successful IRB application, and strengthens the capacity to develop an IRB within HEIs that have not yet established them. Encouraging strong partnerships and continuous dialogue between academics and community members will help academics access critical on-the-ground knowledge and facilitate translation into practice. Even academics with strong writing skills should seek guidance in translating research for use. To the extent possible, working these partnership models into research schemes and themes will aid partners in effective collaboration.



Recommendation 5: Incentivize Changes in the Academic Environment and Culture Through Funding and Leadership Capacity Strengthening

HEIs face internal challenges with academic culture and leadership. Faculty in SSA are pressured to spend time teaching rather than conducting research, and junior faculty are left without opportunities to advance their careers since academic promotions are primarily research focused. Junior faculty are often not selected as principal investigators or lead authors of publications despite doing most of the work. Institutions need a better incentives structure to encourage development research, and mentorship that encourages the development of junior faculty and leadership skills that foster trust among faculty, senior faculty and institutional leadership.

While this is an issue internal to HEIs, to the extent possible in future funding, USAID and SSA governments should seek to promote culture changes within universities that encourage leadership to permit additional time for research, empower women and junior faculty, and offer opportunities to make community-level impacts by incentivizing translational research.

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For further information

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