

HARNESSING THE POTENTIAL OF A RESEARCH DRIVEN ECONOMY¹

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I would like to raise some issues pertaining to the potential of research as an economic engine. These are: The purpose of research; The Place and Status of Researchers and Institutions in Society; The Issue of the Quality of Research as a Security concern at the national and local levels; Individual Obligations and Responsibilities to the State and Society; and the Challenge in Kenyan Research Institutions.

Serious countries spend a lot of resources on research as a matter of national security to safeguard national interests that include to stimulating economies. This requires political leadership with the “vision-thing” that encourages the harnessing of a country’s intellectual resources to serve its national interests. It adequately facilitates its researchers to analyse existing local (internal) and global (external) environment, identify challenges and potential obstacles, and suggest options on how to handle the expected and the unknown.

Serious research calls for paying attention to the entire education industry because the foundation of effective research is quality education. Yes, education is an industry but the paradox is that education is the one commodity for which people pay dearly but rarely want to get their money’s worth, especially if they engage in *paper chase*. In Kenya, for instance, the education sector is riddled with endless problems, symbolic of national rot, that end up making people to lose confidence.

Loss of confidence in any country’s education industry threatens national interests, especially security and the economy. The state’s ability to offer coordinated education on the duties and

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obligations of citizenship, which should be the anchor of national and community security, is diminished and therefore it cannot effectively inculcate values in people's minds. Besides, people graduating at various levels of the educational ladder, without proper senses of duties and obligations of citizenship, have little attachment to the state or place that they call home. And their "certificates" become questionable at every level.

Loss of confidence is particularly serious at the level of universities where there appears to be confusion as to what the purpose is. The choices are to produce and transmit advanced knowledge, to "train" advanced "technicians", or to raise lots of money through *paper chase*? Subsequently, two types of universities appear to have cropped up: Conveyor belts and Creators of knowledge. In the conveyor belt category, the quality of some universities in terms of instructors, facilities, and academic environment are questionable. They are consumers and transmitters of other people's knowledge and rarely contribute to the increase of that knowledge.

In conveyor belt universities, politely termed "teaching universities", the management appears to subscribe to Howard B. Altman's "six-step program" on how to demoralize faculty. Managers flood classes with numbers that are hard to manage, overload instructors and limit the instructor's capacity to think and keep up with respective professions. Their mission tends to be a technical one of transmitting knowledge generated elsewhere and even to babysit graduate students.

This in turn affects ability to offer quality, whether teaching or supervision. In some cases, the unqualified end up teaching and "supervising." This encourages the *paper chase* mentality that is prevalent with students who have little time for university work and still want papers called *degree*. As a result, even the doctorates such universities purport to award seem to lack substance. This gives rise to the notion of "technical doctorates" that are designed to allow candidates to be called "Dr." but not to engage in serious research or have ability to raise critical questions.

Ultimately, the public and employers grumble about the quality of university products that are devoid of critical thinking or ability to handle simple routines. Such products are drags to national productivity whether social, economic, or political. They do not harness the potential for research driven economy. They tend to be national drawbacks.

The strange thing is that governments and employers are also to blame because they encourage the *paper chase*, not quality, and are miserly on funding local researchers and research institutions. They still complain about quality which gives them reason to outsource research and policy making ideas. This tends to intensify intellectual dependency and excessive research and intellectual dependency undermines a country's economic potential. In Africa, this research and intellectual dependency on extra-continental forces is widespread and worrying. It partly explains Africa's weakness in using research to harnessing economic potential. There is, therefore, serious need for rethink on the place of all types of research in African universities. Universities should stop being conveyor belts that discourage independent thinking, overload instructors, and babysit graduate students. Since they do not produce researchers, few help to drive the national economies.

The benefits to society come from the second type of universities, often termed research universities. These stress knowledge creation, transmission, and sharing and encourage innovation, problem solving, and intellectual curiosity. In such universities, people enjoy pursuit of ideas, thrive in handling challenges of the mind, and inspire others. Combining the production, consumption, and transmission of knowledge in equal measures, they pay attention to quality research and production of all types of knowledge. It is in such universities that society's social and economic potentials are harnessed not simply by concentrating on immediate short-term huddles but also -on anticipating future challenges and how to handle them. Such universities attract the best of the minds and ensure that those minds are not wasted through starvation and unwelcoming intellectual environment. That is the reason research drives the economies of powerful countries while the weak ignore research and remain dependent and prone to manipulation.

In promoting research to drive the economy, certain considerations need special attention. The following are thoughts:

1. *The purpose of research.*

There is need for clarity on the purpose of particular research. Is it to solve evident problems or is it to expand the horizons of knowledge to improve the welfare of society? Whatever the case,

ability to do research is an outgrowth and effectiveness of the education system in any place. That “education” should be a wholesome undertaking involving both mind and material. It becomes cultural and mental exposure that frees people to think within certain contexts. It helps to explore existing or new ideas in the interests of society and state, or for its own sake. Once people engage in exploring ideas and ways of doing things, they engage in research whose ultimate goal should be to make society better than it is.

With proper educational preparation, people can engage in research which appears to be split into two. Some regard research as technical and insist that it is simply a technical occupation, methodically pursuing a set narrow path in particular fields without necessarily thinking of its impact on society. Paul Feyerabend had a point in warning against the fetish of methodology. It tends to assume intellectual limitations. What is needed is ability to go beyond the fetish, beyond routine methodology.

Others consider research undertaking as involving both the mind and physical technicalities. In this sense, research is both philosophical and a higher form of engagement in that it takes into account not only the technicalities but also the thinking behind the technicalities. It goes beyond the methodological routine and probes the physical and intellectual unknowns. In that sense, research is philosophical and futuristic in trying to bring the ideal future to the present. It tries to harness the potentials in society to achieve rounded well-being.

Capacity to do research, being one of consequence of an effective education system, is a tool for unlocking the economic potentials in any society for its own good. This is because every society has an educational system whose primary purpose is to reproduce itself and to perpetuate the best of its values. To do that, it needs mechanisms of reevaluation and research would be part of that mechanism.

Ultimately, the purpose of research then should be to promote society’s sense of self-reliance, not dependence. In promoting self-reliance, research should help to equip that society with appropriate tools for protecting and advancing its perceived interests. This presumes knowledge of what those interests are and the distinction between core and periphery interests. Often, many people do not

know their collective interests or the difference between the core and the periphery. Targeted research should make this clear to the particular society.

2. The Place and Status of Researchers and Institutions in Society.

To a large extent, the strength of a society depends on how well it treats its educators, researchers, and critical institutions. If they are taken seriously, that society moves ahead of others. If they are ignored, and mistreated, that society tends to lag behind the others, imports knowledge, and cannot defend its interests, partly because policy makers are not clear on what those interest are. In this sense, the presence of dilapidated institutions in a state or society is a sign of social and national decay. It shows lack of commitment to that society's survival, willingness to remain dependent on others, and actual mental enslavement.

To be effective, researchers and research institutions should be well equipped and supplied for them to deliver quality findings and to suggest viable options to current and potential challenges. Failure to do this implies that the state or particular society does not value advancement or creation of knowledge and has a slave mentality of expecting others, mainly the *master states*, to do the thinking for them and to entertain belief that all they have to do is to consume imported knowledge. This makes research organs and serious researchers vital assets for liberation of a country's political economy. As such, researchers should be people of honour, respect, and authority.

3. The Quality of Research as a Security concern, national and local

Rarely do people connect the condition of insecurity and poor economy in society or threats to national security to the quality and type of research activities that is offered within the state. Yet there is direct co-relation between lack of quality research and a state's socio-economic instability. Poor research quality encourages policy makers to outsource decisions to foreigners, in the form of advice, who have adequate research support. While some of those foreigners may be well meaning, their primary obligation is to look after the interests of their countries. Their desires and actions might actually be inimical to national and local interests; that would be a threat. The

tragedy would be that policy makers may not be aware of such threat emanating from outsourcing thinking.

In part this is because, in many instances, ignorance derived from poor quality research feeds insecurity. Each state has an obligation to provide quality well-being for citizens and to safeguard itself by reducing ignorance. It has to shape and inculcate values to citizens to know social and national interests and how those values affect everyone. One way is to have quality education that would lead to quality research, not outsourcing thinking. For this reason, every powerful state controls its education and research agenda; weak ones overly-depend on other countries on both and even outsource policy and decision making. Failure to take research seriously, therefore, is an obstacle to harnessing the potential of a research driven economy.

4. Individual Obligations and Responsibilities to State and Society?

Most people do not have senses of duty and responsibility to the community and state which probably accounts for the break down in society. Whereas citizens expect and should demand services from the state, they also have to take individual responsibility and not expect the state to do everything for them. The notion that citizens or individuals are separate from the state is fallacious and is fed by ignorance.

Research can help to counter such ignorance and to find ways of instilling sense of responsibility and duty to state and society. It should nurture individuals to avoid proliferation of threats to others. Social science can show the danger of thinking that harm can go only to others and not to self and that wishing ill to others tends to boomerang on those with such unbecoming proclivities. Such research would have the effect of encouraging civility, sense of social and cultural responsibility, air of stability and help to create conducive environment for positive investments that boost the country's political economy.

5. *The Challenge in Kenyan Research Institutions.*

All is not well with Kenyan universities, so Education Cabinet Secretary Jacob Kaimenyi authoritatively asserted. He was right because something has gone wrong in Kenya, a country where educators do not command the same respect or authority as they used to. Subsequently, Kenya has recently appeared to be in anguish because it is a poor mirror image of what it should be. Its universities are deteriorating instead of forging ahead and research is, at best, at standstill. Since the state and the corporate world are reluctant to invest in serious research, including in the country's own narrative, Kenya is in danger of intellectually being held hostage by those who invest in serious research on geopolitical controls.

Very little research on diverse issues affecting country is taking place as potential researchers engage in pedestrian survival tactics. Instead, universities appear to be staffed by underpaid, overworked, demoralized, demotivated, and in many growing instances by people without capacity for research or critical thinking. Such people, in universities or research centres, have problems producing any research, let alone quality research, and the country is the ultimate loser. No wonder Kaimenyi is lamenting.

It is possible, however, to uplift research activities in Kenya from its low point to a level that would transform it into an engine of socio-economic growth as well as the agent of stability. This requires collective undertaking involving every stakeholder, besides Kaimenyi, to face the unpleasant reality. It means having to re-examine various issues candidly and to think of ways out of the predicament.

Re-examination would entail several things. These include attitudinal transformation in Kenya towards research, particularly from policy makers. While making collaborative effort to learn from, and reinforce, other researchers, it would also imply reducing knowledge dependency by developing capacity to produce knowledge. This would mean a shift from senses of hopelessness and helplessness to inspirational and determination to achieve, the desire to create knowledge and apply it productively. Although, in comparison to some African countries, Kenya appears to do well, it is not producing cutting edge research in humanities, arts, natural and social sciences,

medicine, engineering, or education. Since it imports and consumes other people's research and their derived knowledge, it effectively finances those foreign institutions. A national decision to devote adequate resources to research can help to change this.

Compare, for instance, Kenya and India. Although Kenya has very good and outstanding doctors, its citizens keep sending money to India in order to receive comprehensive treatment on various ailments. The difference between Kenya and India, other than the fact that India's population of 1.2 billion is roughly 300 times bigger than Kenya's, is that it made serious investments in medical research. The fruits of that investment are that India has gradually become the world's capital for affordable medicine. Indian research has turned medical services into a global export commodity and a stimulant to Indian economy.

The future for research in Kenya, therefore, can be made promisingly bright by striving to make research the engine of all types of growth. Already a pivotal state in Eastern and Central Africa, Kenya's position can be enhanced through targeted research. Its effect would be to increase the sense of stability and security, to determine its own narrative, to come up with innovative ways of working and doing business, and most important to encourage positive investments that boost national political and economic well-being. This means that it is in Kenya's national interests to facilitate its researchers adequately. It would be an intellectually liberating undertaking and the state needs to show tangible commitment. There is no other way about it unless Kenyans desire to remain dependent importers of knowledge, mostly irrelevant and enslaving knowledge.