

Chapter 20

Dynamics of Collaboration between U.S. Foundations and African Universities

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ABSTRACT

The question of interest in this chapter is the recent project referred to as the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, and the partner Foundations' goal to contribute to the transformation of a select number of universities in selected African countries. Can public universities in sub-Saharan Africa fully accept the solutions proposed by a private donorship from the West? In exploring the question this chapter draws upon the theoretical frameworks of neo-institutionalism and resource dependency to analyze the related issues. It also reviews, within a neo-institutional perspective, the long-standing debate on U.S. foundations' international activities, and discusses these foundations' perceived influence over Africa's higher education system. Applied to the relationship between U.S. foundations and African universities, this lens seeks to shed new light on the debate about donor funding and its influence on educational reforms.

SUMMARY

The case study that is developed in this chapter is a project referred to as the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, a group of private American foundations that joined forces to transform a select number of African universities. This chapter draws upon the theoretical frameworks of neo-institutionalism and resource dependency to examine how and if universities in Africa, whether directly funded or not, fully accept the solutions proposed by private American foundations and actually expect to benefit from them. The findings point out the complex relationship and interaction between grantors and grantees, as well as resource scarcity that forced universities to adapt their research agendas in order to access the available funds. In addition, there is competition for resources amongst recipient institutions and pressure

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3019-1.ch020

from national governments for institutions to be responsive to economic and development priorities. Furthermore, donor-initiated normative standardization generates a status-creating academic field, with successful institutions differentiating themselves from the rest. University-led autonomy-oriented policies and ownership claims are not always taken into consideration by the community of international donors and higher education developers. And resistance to change inherited from years of institutional upheavals is deeply engrained mechanisms that need to be taken into consideration.

INTRODUCTION

Questions concerning the impact of private donors on education and education reform resurface regularly in both the local and global arenas. In the United States, public school initiatives supported by established foundations such as The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Walton Family Foundation, or W.K. Kellogg Foundation, among many others, and by individual donors such as Eli Broad, Michael Bloomberg or Mark Zuckerberg, to name but a few, often make headlines that criticize the donors' choices and question their legitimacy.¹ In general, critics question the effectiveness and fairness of the philanthropists' pet-project approach, a strategy that takes control away from local communities as foundations unilaterally set the course of education reform using their financial weight as a powerful incentive. Critics also argue that many donor-led education projects are utopian, not scientifically-based, and succumb to the schools' institutional environments, producing limited results and ignoring the link between education and poverty.

A similar set of questions and criticisms must be raised with regard to U.S. foundations' funding of education-based initiatives outside of the United States. The case study that is developed in this chapter the Partnership for Higher Education in Africa, a group of private American foundations that joined forces to transform a select number of African universities between 2000 and 2010. The consortium included seven of the most prominent foundations in the United States: Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Ford Foundation, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Rockefeller Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and The Kresge Foundation. Overall, the Partnership invested close to \$500 million and supported institutions and research networks in nine countries.²

Although most of these foundations were already involved in education reform and had strong ties to the African continent, they decided to concert their efforts in order to tackle the major issues confronting the development of African universities, including: "technical obstacles to participation in increasingly global intellectual communities; redefining the nature of quality within international and local contexts; lowering costs through economies of scale; increasing access and gender equity; and positioning higher education as a responsible partner in building democratic societies"³. A report published by the Partnership at the end of its decade-long, collaborative effort claims that it had "directly or indirectly improved conditions for 4.1 million African students enrolled at 379 universities and colleges" (Grant Lewis et al., 2010).

While these figures may seem exaggerated, the Partnership "capitalized on the distinctive contribution that each foundation could make through shared learning, and enhanced the ability of grant-makers to support sustainable improvements in university performance".⁴ As such, about 40 universities⁵ received direct support from these donors, and as a result the entire field of higher education in Africa increased in desirability among international funders and higher education developers. However, the

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