

Forestry education in Africa: rethinking current directions

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National planning and regional collaboration are advocated to help diversify professional forestry education programmes in Africa.

Public investment in forestry education will increasingly be pegged to student enrolments, and current trends in Africa are worrying (see article by Temu in this issue). University education is being liberalized in most African countries, and many universities are offering options for students to pursue courses of their own choice provided that they have their own funding. Under these circumstances, those programmes that traditionally prepared students for employment in the public sector will face severe competition which might lead to closure. This calls for innovative reforms as far as training of foresters is concerned.

When forestry education was first evolving in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, it was envisaged that the forestry schools and faculties developed would be few with subregional coverage to minimize capital investment and take advantage of scarce human resources. However, because of the lack of national and regional discussion and coordination in the 1980s and 1990s, programmes were developed ad hoc even in neighbouring countries. Some countries started their own programmes because it was considered more cost effective to train students in the country than to send them to other countries. Political relations among countries also played a part. For

example, in 1970, the University of East Africa (now Makerere University) in Uganda introduced a B.Sc. programme in forestry for students from Kenya, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania. However, because of political unrest in Uganda, the Government of the United Republic of Tanzania decided in 1973 to start a Department of Forestry at Morogoro Campus of the University of Dar es Salaam (later elevated to full faculty status in 1984 following the establishment of Sokoine University of Agriculture). Kenya started its own forestry programme at the University of Nairobi in 1977 following the breakup of the East African Community.

Despite the broad nature of forestry as a profession, many of the education programmes that developed in Africa drew from a narrow pool of expertise and forestry experience and were largely similar in structure and scope, providing little opportunity for diversification, which favours comparative advantage. In contrast with the situation in developed countries, forestry training programmes within various institutions in different parts of Africa do not usually have distinct specialties. Thus forestry schools in one country produce personnel with the same expertise as those in the next.



Most forestry education programmes in Africa have developed with largely similar structure and scope, and have produced personnel that lack specialization

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LACK OF NATIONAL POLICIES

Even within countries, forestry programmes have multiplied ad hoc, without regard to the demand for graduates. For example, in Kenya, the main forestry training programme is located at Moi University. About 200 km away, at Egerton University, similar forestry training is offered as part of a programme in natural resource management. Nigeria and the Sudan currently have several forestry departments and faculties in various universities; the rationale for such expansion is questionable when employment opportunities in forestry are diminishing.

In some countries, numbers of forestry graduates, especially at the B.Sc. level, are higher than forestry personnel requirements. For example, three institutions in the Sudan offering a B.Sc. in Forestry together produced at least 590 graduates from 1993 to 2002 (Temu, 2002), compared with only 164 professional positions in the country's forest service projected in 1980 for the period to 2000 (Roche and Cooper, 1980). In other countries, particularly in French-speaking Africa, there are serious personnel deficits, and some countries lack professional forestry training programmes altogether.

These discrepancies illustrate the absence of national planning or policies to harmonize training for forestry professionals and technicians with personnel requirements, which is common to most countries.

REGIONAL COLLABORATION

Each of the three East African countries runs its own forestry faculties; would it not be worthwhile to coordinate the programmes so that each faculty could become a known centre of excellence in one area of forestry? In addition, instead of offering one general degree course, institutions could offer two- or three-pronged degrees (e.g. a B.Sc. in Community Forestry, Agroforestry and Rural Development) to enhance diversity and perhaps create more opportunities for foresters in a dispersed job market.

As regional alliances are reemerging, the time may now be right to revisit the idea of a regional approach to forestry education, especially in light of shrinking student enrolments. It would be unrealistic to expect a forestry faculty already established in one country to discontinue its programme in deference to a programme offered in a neighbouring country. But it would be possible to encourage regional integration through review of curricula and development of common postgraduate programmes, as well as launching of collaborative research and exchange of faculty.

An example is the Network of Environmental and Forest Training Institutions in Central Africa (Réseau des institutions de formation forestière et environnementale d'Afrique centrale, RIFFEAC). RIFFEAC was created by eight forestry schools and research institutions in October 2001 with a view to improving the quality of training to respond to the needs of sustainable management of forest ecosystems in the Congo Basin. Among other objectives, the network seeks to promote exchanges between its members, particularly in teaching and research.

Forestry schools in West Africa could take advantage of the cooperation within the framework of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to forge linkages similar to RIFFEAC. Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania are reviving the spirit of the collapsed East African Community, opening up avenues for collaborative ventures in sustainable forest management including networking in forestry training and research. The Inter-University Council for East Africa has proposed a student exchange programme among East African public universities under which at least 40 students in various disciplines from each country would receive university education in the sister countries. This body is already coordinating joint research projects in the region.

The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) initiative opens a wider scope

for continental collaboration in all aspects of development. The extent to which forestry education can benefit from these linkages will in large measure depend on the assertiveness and farsightedness of forestry faculties and professionals.

Bibliography

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