Introduction

In the midst of poverty the greatest crime is to waste human talent and the most pernicious source of wastage stems from isolating human capacities that should be reinforcing each other for the common good. If that is true, the African university, business and research communities should be held to account for their continued isolation from each other because they have the deepest pools of specialised human capacities. The Africa Commission implicated the failure of these communities to exploit their potential to add value to each other as the primary cause of Africa’s failure to take advantage of its unrivalled potential for development.

The Universities, Business and Research in Agricultural Innovation (UniBRAIN) initiative is responding to these charges by combining the capacities of these communities to release the potential of Africa’s youth to drive the growth of Agriculture - Africa’s predominant industry and greatest employer.

The role of agribusiness

Contrary to common presumptions African smallholder farmers and pastoralists have repeatedly demonstrated amazing capacity to respond to market opportunities. The key to agricultural development is, therefore, to create markets for them by raising the value and demand for their produce. For this it is imperative that Africa should have a strong agribusiness sector to capture the potential value addition rather than continue to provide raw materials for foreign industries.

The role of agribusiness incubation

Africa has the world’s fastest growing population of young job seekers that should be an immensely valuable demographic bonus. However, it is growing much faster than the present rate of job creation and that is a recipe for catastrophe. Accelerating the rate of job creation depends on speeding the establishment of new businesses with high growth potential and ensuring that they succeed and flourish. And that cannot be left to chance. It demands the establishment of agribusiness incubators that can provide the support required by aspiring under-resourced entrepreneurs.

The above is true of businesses of all kinds but agribusiness entrepreneurs require additional specialised help in dealing with large numbers of small suppliers, who produce variable qualities and amounts of produce seasonally which are perishable and subject to health, safety, animal welfare, religious and customs factors that do not concern ‘normal’ businesses.

The UniBRAIN model

To bring the three communities together, Danida has provided funds to establish agribusiness incubators owned by combinations of universities, business and research institutions with three overriding objectives:

1. Turning agribusiness innovations into high-growth businesses
2. Producing graduates fit to be agribusiness leaders
3. Sharing and up-scaling innovative outputs, experiences and practices

1. Turning agribusiness innovations into high-growth businesses

The UniBRAIN Facility, hosted by FARA, supports the establishment of agribusiness incubators in different countries, business ecosystems and value chains. The UniBRAIN agribusiness incubators are legal not-for-profit organisations, which provide specialized support for aspiring agribusiness founders including help with:

- Pitching competitions
- Developing business models
- Sourcing start-up capital
- Affordable workspaces and offices
- Equipment for sharing while volumes are too low to afford their own
- Shared services such as accounting and auditing
- Technical advice
- Customer-development and sourcing markets
- Networking with potential suppliers and customers
- And, most important of all, access to competent and motivated mentors

The incubators’ success metrics include:

- Number of viable commercial enterprises established
- Number of jobs created by enterprises
- Income generated by the incubators themselves
- Jobs created by agribusiness founders
- Net revenues generated by the founders
UniBRAIN agribusiness incubator clients

Aspiring African agribusiness founders
The only qualifications required by aspiring African agribusiness founders to apply for support by a UniBRAIN agribusiness incubator are:

- To have found a problem that can be solved by an agribusiness solution
- That the problem affects a large enough number of people
- That the cost of the solution is below what the customers are willing to pay
- That the solution is pragmatic and, is with the help of the incubator, within the competencies of the Founders

2. Producing graduates fit to be agribusiness leaders
The UniBRAIN agribusiness consortia contribute to improving the quality of agribusiness graduates produced by their university and college members through:

- Exposing lecturers to the real world of agribusiness
- Helping improve curricula context and relevance
- Creating opportunities for internships and work experience
- Being a source of visiting lecturers as role models
- Collaborating in Earn as you Learn schemes for exciting and enabling students to found their own agribusinesses.

Special features of the UniBRAIN model

| Technology commercialization for productivity | The UniBRAIN model has demonstrated its effectiveness as a vehicle for science and technology transfer, sharing benefits of discoveries and enhancing agribusiness productivity. Technologies developed by sub regional and research institutions, which were shelved, have been commercialized. |
| Providing vocational skills | NEPAD/GIZ [1] have revealed that most agricultural vocational institutes are collapsing and this creating gaps between industry vocational skills needs and availability. UniBRAIN provides opportunities for hands-on training for incubatees and interns, which build practical experience and capacities to fit industry skills needs. UniBRAIN has, through the incubators, created such opportunities in using indigenous microorganisms (IMO) to create healthy environments for pigs, in producing juice and wine from bananas, coffee processing, greenhouse technology and rice processing. |
| Mobilizing the private sector for value chain investments | The UniBRAIN model fills in a critical gap in the agricultural value chain – the ‘Missing Middle’. By focusing on SMEs, it provides the opportunity to strengthen both forward and backward linkages within strategic agricultural commodity value chains. Currently more than 540 private sector firms have been mobilized to invest in agribusiness value chains activities. |

Source: AGRA State of Agriculture Report 2015

3. Sharing and up-scaling innovative outputs, experiences and practices
UniBRAIN generates economies of scale and, more importantly, the sharing of experience and lessons learnt by having a common 'UniBRAIN Facility' serving all the UniBRAIN agribusiness consortia. However, the same high-growth criteria were applied to the UniBRAIN business model so that it would have the potential to make a truly continent-wide impact. The UniBRAIN model was also built on modern agile engineering principles, which now enable it to promote agribusiness incubation across the Continent by establishing the autonomous African Agribusiness Incubation Network (AAIN).

AAIN’s vision is to be the hub of African agribusiness innovation with the objectives to:

- Facilitate establishment and growth of sustainable agribusiness incubators
- Exchange information, best practices and lessons learnt
- Facilitate innovative agribusiness financing and investment
- Strengthen the capacity of its members to deliver agribusiness incubation

The UniBRAIN initiative and AAIN exist to serve any African university or college, business or agricultural research organization committed to:

1. Turning agribusiness innovations into high-growth businesses
2. Producing graduates fit to be agribusiness leaders

Contacts: