THE DEVELOPMENT IDEAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
THE EXPERIENCE OF KENYA AND TANZANIA

D. COURT
The Rockefeller Foundation, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

During the 1970s African universities were subject to powerful external expectations about what their role in national development ought to be. These stressed the need for universities to serve national policy and public welfare in direct, immediate and practical ways. The varied response of the East African universities provides some instructive experience about the potential and limits of a meaningful role for African universities in the 1980s. Although several of the chosen university innovations, especially at Dar es Salaam, were significant in their own right, they have not yet demonstrated a comprehensive or convincing model for emulation on the continent. An explanation for this mixed record suggests that the developmental expectations were partly premature and inflated and partly misconceived.

In the first place, for most of the 1970s the universities were preoccupied with the internal task of institution-building and were in no position to expand their social responsibilities into an effective extension role. Secondly, the East African experience suggests that universities are not the most appropriate institutions for providing practical leadership in development projects or in policy-making which goes beyond pedagogic purposes. Thirdly, the varied experience of the three universities of Makerere, Dar es Salaam and Nairobi has shown the extent to which the character of the political regime circumscribes the assertion of an autonomous role. Finally, the public emphasis upon an external contribution to development has distracted attention from the real internal achievement of the universities during the 1970s which was to build up an indigenous teaching and research capacity.

The challenge of the 1980s is to convince their governments and national populations that their contribution to national development lies not in the extent to which they can conform to certain material and intellectual prescriptions, but in their ability to demonstrate that above all the process of development requires the kind of trained minds and thinking society that universities are uniquely equipped to promote.
A critique of African universities gathered momentum in the 1970s. Universities were not justifying their high costs in a corresponding contribution to the improved well-being of national populations and the transformation of their society. Adherence to the colonial model from which they sprang was seen to be inhibiting their ability to respond to the needs of their own society and leaving them as islands of unbecoming detachment in a sea of poverty. Such characteristics as their disciplinary structure, specialized degree courses, elitist ethos, academic preoccupations and international pretensions were seen by critics as leading universities to pay greater attention to their standing in the eyes of foreigners than to the relevance of their activities to the needs of their own country (Hargreaves, 1973, p. 35).

Implicit and often explicit in this critique was a model of an alternative "relevant" university that differed in form and purpose from the European and North American universities on which most African universities were patterned, and which frequently sought the obverse of elements of the inherited model. The climate for reform was set by leading intellectuals on the continent. As early as 1966 Julius Nyerere emphasized that, "The University in a developing society must put the emphasis of its work on subjects of immediate moment to the nation in which it exists, and it must be committed to the people of that nation and their humanistic goals" (Nyerere, 1966). Aklihl Habte, who was the Vice Chancellor of a university which was not modelled on a particular foreign institution, addressed the issue directly when he argued that: "While the term university may have some universal meaning one should not assume any particular model in developing countries to decide the character of an institution administering higher education" (Habte, 1974, p. 214). The point was made even more strongly in the report of a conference organized by the Association of African Universities in 1973 which called for a fundamental redefinition of the role of the university:

What seemed to be required, therefore, was a new working definition of a university, which would signify its commitment, not just to knowledge for its own sake, but to the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of, and for the amelioration of the conditions of the common man and woman in Africa. The African University must in the 1970s not only wear a different cloak, but must also be differently motivated. It must be made of a different and distinctive substance from the traditions of Western universities, and must evolve a different attitude and a different approach to its task. The truly African university must be one that draws its inspiration from its environment, not a transplanted tree, but growing from a seed that is planted and nurtured in the African soil (Yesufu, 1973, p. 40).

Diagnosis was followed by prescriptions for the restructuring of universities around defined developmental purposes. The A.A.U. workshop just