U.S.-Africa University Partnerships: Possibilities and Realities

Bob Wekesa

Introduction

Nearly six months since the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit held in Washington DC in December 2022, implementation of the pledges is underway in what is emerging as an international institutional framework for U.S.-Africa relations. If the implementation of the commitments made – particularly by the U.S. – is anything to go by, an assessment of what has been done and what hasn't been done would be of great interest to researchers, faculty, and students at universities in the U.S., in Africa, and around the world. Additionally, and perhaps even more important for universities is that university-specific projects and programs should be of as great interest as other areas of engagement.

Most Africa-U.S. scholars will be keenly following the post-Summit implementation and progress – or lack of it. We can expect journal papers and master's and Ph.D. theses in the next couple of months and years based on the Summit. The "university community" will also be analyzing the implications of key agreements and action plans. But what are the possibilities for enhanced Africa-U.S. partnerships against the realities?

Possibilities

A nearly obvious starting point for research and teaching on the Summit is the sheer volume of media coverage that resulted from the Summit. The event was a mega-global event with wall-to-wall media coverage reverberating well into May 2023. Thus, the stories published, and broadcast can serve as material for journalism, media, and communication studies. Such studies can use any number of theories and concepts in the communication field. For instance, who set the agenda? How was the event framed? What discourses do we see when we do content and network analysis? Can we read soft power capital from the media coverage? Moreover, from the media coverage perspective, there is ample evidence that the Summit was primed as a geopolitical strategy by the United States to ostensibly counter China and Russia in Africa. The reasons for such a geostrategic reading of the Summit in the news coverage and editorializing can be an interesting study area particularly given the strenuous denials by U.S. officials about such geopolitical goals.

Beyond media narratives, what are the issues and themes that fit into broader research agendas at universities in Africa and the U.S.? A probable starting point is to look at the key outcome document from the Summit entitled the "U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit: Strengthening Partnerships to Meet Shared Priorities". The document primes nine themes, namely, People-to-People Ties; Global

Governance, and Diplomatic Engagement; Trade, Investment, and Inclusive Economic Growth; Technology and Innovation; Health; Food Security; Climate Change; Democracy and Governance; and Peace and Security.

Diaspora and youth

In the people-to-people ties domain, the U.S. side made two important pledges: the establishment of the President's Advisory Council on African Diaspora Engagement (PAC-ADE) and the expansion of the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI). The PAC-ADE is a new entity in an attempt at responding to the rise of the historical and contemporary African diaspora as an avenue for closer ties between Africa and the U.S. From a governmental viewpoint, this is an international relations strategy with a foreign policy goal. Not many global powers in the world (think China and Russia) have as large an African diaspora as the U.S. Indeed, diasporic organizations, and individuals have been advocating greater attention to the diaspora as the connecting fiber for Africa-U.S. relations. Regarding the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI), the Biden administration pledged "to invest more than $690 million over the next two years, for a total of nearly $1.1 billion". Here, we see a palpable connection between Africa's youth bulge and the U.S. interest in tapping this resource as an avenue for non-traditional diplomatic engagement.

In both the diaspora and the young leaders' action plans, researchers can seek to answer several questions from various disciplines as well as with inter-, intra-, multi-, and cross-disciplinary lenses. How for instance does the U.S. plan to address the knotted question of old and new diaspora (descendants of slavery and voluntary emigrants respectively) from the discipline of history? Are the diasporas linked, disparate, half-linked, or half-delinked? How can we view the youth perspectives of the diaspora as linked to or distinct from the old or historical diaspora? From the disciplines of international politics, how can or would the administration go about promoting the diaspora as a foreign policy avenue when there are many racial justice issues that dog the U.S. itself? One is reminded of the George Floyd murder when Africans protested openly and a couple of research projects on racial injustices rose in the U.S. and in some universities. Can the concept and practice of youth diplomacy be infused into studies and research around citizen, people-to-people, and cultural diplomacy? Using theories and concepts from the fields of cultural and religious studies as well as critical race theories, how would we understand difficult issues such as the differences between the U.S. and many African countries on LGBTQ issues which are particularly pronounced for the youth? For instance, when U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris visited Ghana, Tanzania, and Zambia in late March 2023, African leaders, and ostensibly African scholars railed against the promotion of LGBTQ+ equality as part of the broader democracy promotion agenda. Indeed, the YALI is itself heavily civil

society-inclined raising the question of whether it might have an impact on how we understand U.S.-Africa relations from the perspective of political science. With dynamics such as the return of African diasporas to the continent and the significance of diaspora remittances, how can the new action plans be understood from African American, black, and diaspora scholarship? Moreover, the trade, and investment elements suggest that the field of economics could be relevant from a research perspective. Since the YALI action plan includes business promotion, how would we analyze and study the role of the youth as a means of boosting trade and investments between the U.S. and Africa? Over recent years, scholarship on the concept of global Africa has gained momentum. How do the new plans connect with the African Union's designation of diaspora as the sixth region of Africa and therefore an important avenue for achieving Agenda 2063 aspirations?

Geopolitics

In the "Global Governance and Diplomatic Engagement" domain, action plans, the Biden administration's support for Africa's membership of the G20 and pivot to Africa through high-level visits by officials were primed. These two loaded action plans have already generated a buzz about a change of strategy regarding how the U.S. views Africa's role and place in the world. How can international relations scholars analyze the relevance of drawing Africa into the G20, an entity in which the Western world is prominent vis a vis the lone voice of China? Can geopolitical and geostrategic concepts and theories be used to analyze and understand this new proposal? For instance, is the proposal meant merely to be symbolic or one with alliance-building intentions in which much of Africa would be drawn toward the Western alliance? What can diplomacy scholarship tell us about the approaches, goals, and outcomes of the inclusion of Africa in the G20? The high-level visits to Africa by U.S. officials have already gotten underway with a dense number of visits. While the concepts of public diplomacy and soft power stand a good chance of understanding the implications of the visits, it can also be said that the U.S. has other intentions. Can the combining of the concepts and practices of public diplomacy and soft power with those of democracy promotion help us understand the core of U.S. intentions toward Africa? More broadly, how can the fields of international politics help us understand the varying or differing goals between the U.S. and Africa in the palpable reform of international institutions, particularly the United Nations?

Trade and investments

Analyzing the "Trade, Investment, and Inclusive Economic Growth" action plans shows that this is the domain in the relations that the U.S. is particularly prioritizing compared to other areas of engagement. In "Supporting African Resilience and Recovery" we see a return to the geopolitical theme where the U.S. seeks to raise funds for debt relief but urges other creditors to do the same.

This is a thinly veiled reference to the Chinese debt burden in and on Africa. How therefore would the fields of international finance combine with those of international politics to help us understand U.S.-Africa relations in addressing the complicated question of Africa's need for large development finance against the negative impact of debt on African people? In signing a "Memorandum of Understanding between the United States Government and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Secretariat" the U.S. is seen as hearkening to calls by the African Union for external partners to see the continent as one rather than its disparate 54 nations. Thus, from the fields of economics and finance, how would we understand bilateral versus continental U.S. trade and economic policies toward Africa? In the unveiling of "The First Regional Multi-Sectoral Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compacts", the U.S. looks to respond to Africa's infrastructure gaps. However, the MCC is infused with democracy, human rights, and accountability principles begging questions that would be of interest to scholars working at the intersections of political science-economics-international finance. These are the same questions that would be of interest to scholars trying to make sense of the many projects announced during the Summit by the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation.

Digital technologies

The launch of the "Digital Transformation with Africa Initiative" will draw interest from scholars from the fields of information and technology (ICT); economics, trade, and finance, and international "digital" politics. In the ICT field broadly, an interesting question is whether the proposed plan will help bridge the digital divide that plagues the continent as for instance captured in the "Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020-2030)". The key question is, does the U.S. digital transformation with Africa plan align with the AU plan? Indeed, from a technical viewpoint, an area of interest to scholars in the fields such as computer science and engineering, do the U.S. technologies align with and serve the ICT needs of Africa or are they more geared toward the developed world? In the trade and economic scholarship domain, a key research and teaching question would be, what are the business models through which the proposed digital transformation will be undertaken? Some may for instance leverage the political economy argument that U.S. tech companies are more inclined toward making profits in Africa than serving the continent's information and communication interests. Scholarship on international digital technology politics returns us to ideology-laden geopolitical competition. Will Africans embrace the U.S.-led open, free, and universal use of ICTs governance or will the continent be persuaded toward the so-called ICT sovereignty undergirded by tight controls?

Democracy and elections

The announcement of the "African Democratic and Political Transitions" (ADAPT) initiative is of interest to a wide array of social science and humanities scholars. The main U.S. proposal is to focus on democratic elections as a bulwark against illiberalism on the continent. The question is whether elections alone are sufficient in promoting democratic governance on the continent! Indeed, criticism has been leveled at the U.S. as being light on democracy, human rights, and good governance compared to transactional economic interests during the Summit. Scholars in political science will perhaps study the ostensible double standards in which the U.S. preaches democracy but embraces dictatorial leaders. Scholars will also likely investigate the role of civil society in the U.S. calculus toward Africa, particularly given that many of the scholars in African and U.S. universities are civil society activists.

Universities a missing link

While the statecraft involved in structuring and shaping the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit is a resource for academia, more could be done. If you analyse the schedules and pledges of the Summit, you realize that the missing link is that higher education aspects of the ramped-up Africa-U.S. partnership were the mixing link and are conspicuously low or entirely absent. The main higher education action is via the "University Partnerships Initiative" (UPI) where it was announced that the Department of Education would "provide $1.5 million to facilitate U.S.-Africa university exchanges, joint research, collaboration on academic administration, and public-private partnerships". Another higher education initiative is the plan by the State Department to convene a meeting of "U.S. higher education representatives and education stakeholders from across the continent to explore strategies for increasing the recruitment and retention of African students on a range of U.S. campuses". This latter initiative has no monetary figure allocated to it in the Summit documents. If the broader U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit action plans will proceed as planned, universities and stakeholders in the higher education section will need to step up advocacy to ensure that their research, teaching, and public engagement interests are included. This is particularly important because it means African students will be targeted for entry into U.S. universities and that these students will be identified as leaders connecting Africa and the U.S. What better place to start than with our Africa-U.S. centers or with those of us working on Africa-U.S. topics?

More importantly, while these initiatives are welcome in spirit, the figures allocated to the sector pale in comparison to the direct economics and trade action plans. For instance, compare the $1.5 million allocated to higher education to the $21 billion earmarked for the economics-inclined "African Resilience and Recovery" or the $4 billion allocated to health programs. The point is not that the other areas of need and engagement are unimportant. The point is that higher education

can potentially serve as a catalyst in addressing the economic, social, and political challenges that the U.S.-Africa Leaders arrangement seeks to address. African and American universities can, however, not overly begrudge governments for not getting onto the agenda.

First, it appears universities did not lobby enough, as did other interest groups, for inclusion in the schedule of activities. This is evident in the fact that there is no single action point expressly directed toward university partnerships. Secondly, it may be assumed that in their teaching and research roles and responsibilities, universities already feature in the work that governments, civil society, and businesses do, albeit indirectly. It might not, therefore, have occurred to the planners of the Summit that higher education needs specialized treatment even as it is part of the whole. Thirdly, university-based scholars often follow developments from other sectors of society given that they need the fodder from which they can undertake research and teaching projects. The implication is that professors and students at universities would be relevant to the Summit anyway!

For these reasons, the Summit should serve as the launch pad for the inclusion of higher education perspectives in what is emerging as a formalized U.S.-Africa Partnerships. The approach towards this is to consolidate the university partnerships already in place. Thus, the creation of an Africa-US universities network as a matter of urgency is a critical starting point. However, the creation of such a network does not need to start from scratch for at least four reasons. First, well over 40 universities in the U.S. have African studies centers that have long histories of association with their African counterparts. Second, the U.S. government and various foundations have engaged with African universities over the years through scholarships and exchanges, of which the Fulbright scholarship and the University Partnerships Initiative are exemplars. Third, in the U.S., there are hundreds of Historically Black Colleges and Universities which have a natural affinity to and with Africa. Fourth, American study centers are being launched in Africa. Since the establishment of the African Centre for the Study of the U.S. at Wits University in South Africa in 2018, the universities of Pretoria and Nairobi have launched similar centers with at least eight other universities set to follow suit in 2023 and beyond.

If there is a strategic approach that can be gleaned from the above factors, it is that the building blocks for the inclusion of universities in the emerging partnership are in place. What is left is for key actors within the universities to put their heads together and present their ideas to the relevant U.S. and African authorities and agencies. This further suggests that the universities would have to speak with one voice, even though academia by its very nature is a site for scholarly contestations, disciplinary rivalries, and institutional competitions.

Conclusion

An Africa-U.S. universities network would be a critical component of the broader partnership in terms of research, teaching, knowledge sharing, public engagements, and exchanges across disciplines. First, some of the best ideas for tackling pressing challenges such as climate change and poverty can be generated from collaborative research. Stakeholders would have to invest in the requisite resources for university-based research to be ramped up. The U.S. Government, the African Union, and African governments would do well to always factor in universities in their partnership strategies. Second, we may assume that students who constitute the future of the partnership understand both regions, but the reality is that there are huge knowledge gaps on either side. In the future, more should be done to encourage student exchanges in virtual and in-person formats. Third, it is evident, and let's be clear, many African universities face serious financial problems that have hampered their contribution to society. American universities would have to be magnanimous to share their intellectual resources with African counterparts. But American universities also have their own problems to grapple with. Ultimately governments must step in if universities are to be involved in the partnership(s). This returns us to the need for higher education-specific strategies in future summits and strategies. Finally, in seeking to be part of what might be a historic turning point in U.S.-Africa relations, university leaders would have to tap contacts within the U.S. and African governments. On the U.S. front, a key ally would be Ambassador Johnnie Carson who has been appointed as Special Presidential Representative for U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit Implementation. It would be good for the African Union to equally appoint an envoy for the implementation of plans from the African end of things, including in the higher education sector.

The author Senior Fellow at the Center on Communication Leadership and Policy, University of Southern California, and deputy director at the African Centre for the Study of the United States, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa.