

Reclaiming Extension: Why Agricultural Universities Must Return to Their Roots



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Many agricultural universities in Kenya began as farmer training centres. Egerton University, founded in 1923, was established to build practical agricultural skills among settlers and local communities. University of Eldoret shares a similar history. A reference to the institution, then the *Government Experimental Farm Eldoret*, appears in the *Kenya Gazette Notice Vol. 23, No. 754* of 2nd February 1921, when Mr. James Johnson was appointed as its manager. It was later converted into a Large-Scale Farmers' Training Centre in 1946, before being transformed into Moi Teachers' College in the 1980s, a decision met with strong resistance from local farmers then. Among the most vocal opponents was the late Member of Parliament, Hon. Morogo Arap Saina, himself a beneficiary of the training centre. For decades, both Egerton and Eldoret engaged in farmer training, shaping the agricultural productivity of their surroundings responsible for feeding the vast majority of Kenya. This legacy explains why the areas surrounding these universities

remain some of Kenya's most productive agricultural zones often referred to as national food baskets.



A building opened by President Jomo Kenyatta in 1972. The Eldoret Large-Scale Farmers Training Centre represents the historical roots of the University of Eldoret in farmer training and agricultural extension.

The institutions eventually became universities with expanded mandates, mainly academic and incorporating none-agriculture disciplines. Farmer focused roles that once defined them waned. Today, many of the beneficiaries from the old training centres are ageing while their children are increasingly disinterested in agriculture. Additionally, land fragmentation has become common, as agriculture is often viewed as a fallback option rather than a viable livelihood pathway of first choice. This disinterest is partly linked to the weakening of institutions that once kept agriculture innovative and inspirational. The echoes of farmer frustration from the 1980s persist as farmers continuously remind us, *"This was our college."* During a recent needs assessment, one farmer expressed it bluntly: *"Why doesn't the university station a staff member here throughout instead of visiting once in a while?"* The call is very clear; farmers want the universities to reclaim their extension mandate!

The Outreach Centre: A Bridge Rebuilt

The farmer cries of the 80s were reinforced by a farmer's comment during the RUFORUM Community Action Research Project (CARP) in 2010-2015 that *"We are tired of universities and research institutions coming to us when they have projects. The students do their research on our farms with us; they graduate and the lecturers get promotions, but they leave us just as poor"*. Responding to these concerns, the University of Eldoret established the Outreach Centre in 2017 essentially to revive the spirit of extension and introduce incubation of innovations. The centre is strategically located in the old site where the university farm is sited. Since its creation, the centre has become the university's primary point of contact with farmers, serving over 80,000 farmers through training, demonstrations, and advisory services. It has also become the entry point for collaborations, including industrial partners seeking to sign MoUs with the university. Through

these engagements, the centre has attracted nearly KSh 15 million (US\$120,000) in funding and development support.



Agricultural Outreach Centre where the university meets community

The Outreach Centre's collaborations with Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and community organizations have enabled farmers to adopt modern and climate-smart agricultural practices. The centre started with SNV in 2017/18, in a partnership that helped train several farmers on smart water solutions. This was followed by training farmers on soil testing for proper crop management. The partnerships with CoreHealth and Wealth (NGO) have supported farmers in establishing fish farms and diversifying their production systems in Tongaren Bungoma County. Today the centre has many partners ranging from County governments acquiring extension services, industry and NGOs for research, including experimental plots/Greenhouses by Syngenta and agribusiness innovation incubations; making the center one of the YABIC for the ENABLE Youth-Kenya project. All these illustrate an important point: while converting into a university came with challenges to traditional extension, it also expanded opportunities. And the expanded opportunities are crucial for sustainability. Today, through research-driven collaborations, the university can impact communities in ways that traditional farmer colleges could not. However, outreach or extension requires intentional effort since it is not an automatic mandate for universities.

TAGDev 2.0: Reopening Doors That Were Once Closed

The Transforming African Agricultural Universities to Meaningfully Contribute to Africa's Growth and Development (TAGDev 2.0) program has been catalytic in helping universities reconnect with their extension roots. One of the programme's major achievements has been fostering partnerships between universities and agricultural colleges many of which remained as farmer training institutions. Historically, universities and colleges seldom collaborated. TAGDev changed

this norm. The partnership between the University of Eldoret and Koibatek Agricultural Training College led to the successful hosting of a farmer trade fair where a manual for kitchen gardening was launched. Such collaboration would likely not have occurred without TAGDev encouraging universities to reach and work with institutions positioned closer to farmers.



The launch of the national kitchen garden training manual at the Koibatek Agricultural Training Centre. KATC is one of the institutions collaborating with UoE under TAGDev 2.0. This event was held under the guidance of UoE experts.

Additionally, TAGDev 2.0 has supported the university to review and strengthen its Community Engagement Policy, ensuring community engagement is well structured. Through the emerging Community Seed Systems Framework, collaboration with farmer cooperatives is set to deepen. Students are increasingly undertaking action research proposals rooted in community challenges, and they now present results back to the farmers, ensuring research feeds directly into practice. Research does not end at thesis defense; it returns to where the questions began.

Looking Forward: Reclaiming the Future of Agriculture

The farmers' resistance to converting the former Eldoret Large-Scale Farmers' Training Centre stemmed from their deep understanding of what the institution represented. Agricultural productivity is increasingly threatened by population pressure, soil depletion, and climate change, demanding a steady guiding hand for today's farmer. As the population grows, so does the demand for food. It is therefore ironic that, at a moment when agriculture holds immense promise, many young people continue to sell land and abandon farming altogether.

During the needs assessment exercise, one farmer (an elder, not a youth) openly acknowledged that his productivity is far lower than what his father achieved in the 1980s. His admission echoes a broader reality that when farmer training ceased in many colleges, a vital chain of knowledge transmission was broken. Skills that should have been passed from grandparents to parents, and then to the youth were interrupted. Expecting young people to excel in agriculture without this foundation is unrealistic.

This is precisely why TAGDev 2.0's focus on youth training is timely. Agricultural universities now have a central role to play in improving skills and reshaping perceptions. By reclaiming their extension mandate, universities can help a new generation reinterpret agriculture as a viable, modern, and a pathway to self-fulfillment. They can help reignite passion for farming and deliver an education that is genuinely transformative. TAGDev 2.0 offers a unique opportunity to catalyse this shift.