



Network for Education & Multidisciplinary Research Africa (NEMRA)

NEMRA CONFERENCE REPORT

By Dr. Gad Ruzaaza Ndaruhutse, Ph.D, Coordinator, Training and Mentorship (TRAINME) Program

1.0 PREAMBLE

All roads led to Uganda's Flagship University, Makerere University. Back to the old paths that led our Founding Parents upon the podium, we stand on today. Ushered in by the Department of Performance Arts at the Great Makerere, "We build for the Future" The Principal, College of Business and Management Sciences (COBAMS), on behalf of the Vice-chancellor, welcomed all participants. Then followed event by event, ushered in by Uganda's First Lady and Minister of Education, Maama Janet Kataaha Museveni represented by The Commissioner Research, within Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES).

Standing on the already established Protocol, we moved through the Academic and Education rituals of lifelong learning and mutual respect. It was Africa's Premier Multidisciplinary Research, Innovation, Communication & Innovation Conference. Please stand for ovation, Comrade Arinaitwe Rugyendo roared among the equals.

The premier NEMRA Conference provided us with the opportunity to further develop research, to share experiences and to disseminate findings. NEMRA congratulates everyone upon this milestone. We were amazed at the level of enthusiasm and commitment to spearhead research, innovation and community engagement for Africa's

development, leaving no one behind. The conference menu was full, with High Quality Abstracts from a wide array of Disciplines that run from 26-27th March 2024.

Every opportunity and moment was utilized to interact, forge partnerships and to enjoy the conference. We thank everyone for the support. NEMRA singles out the Government of Uganda for the commitment to support research and development and Makerere University for hosting NEMRA's Premier Conference.

At a personal level, on 15th June, 2021, I received an appointment letter as Coordinator, NEMRA Training and Mentorship Department. I had already developed interest in NEMRA during the year 2020. What was most appealing to me was the desire to contribute to the promotion of research and evidence based practice in Africa. My plan was to build on my career path in participating and contributing to educational and research networks earlier on, such as the Mbarara University of Science and Technology (MUST) Community Based Education Research and Research and Service (COBERS) Program, Development Research Uptake in Africa (DRUSSA), Medical Education Partnership Initiative (MEPI) and the African One – Health University Network (AFROHUN) and Doctoral Network Uganda (DNU). This conference, in part, represents the simmering achievement of my dream.

2.0 KEY CONFERENCE OUTPUTS

The Conference covered Research outputs, outcomes and impact towards building a Resiliently Formidable Research Africa Network. Guided by the Organizational Vision and Mission, NEMRA continues to extend her horizon and impact by supporting and strengthening researchers to undertake research for policy formulation and community development.

A few highlights are below:

1) There were a number of Curtain Raiser presentations that culminated into the Address by the Chief Guest: Uganda's First Lady and Minister of Education and Sports' Research Representative. Honestly, it was humbling to learn about the Research Arm of the Ministry of Education and Sports. This Conference Marked the Coming Together of Like Minds. Speaker after Speaker, emphasized the role of Higher Education and Research for Africa's Sustainable Development. When I enjoined, I almost forgot that I am an African for African people and instead emphasized the old Global Village, the Power of Solidarity and the Science of Biology - life, that points at Africa as the Cradle of Humankind. This Conference is equally a rallying invitation for you to come back home - Africa, the place of your Ancestry. When your Mother or Father gets into dire Health Trouble, do you let him / her die? This is not a Conference for and about Africa. This a Conference constructing a fresh reality for the future.

2) The Who is who in Research, Innovation, Teaching and Community Engagement in Africa was either physically present online. Enough is enough for us, at Africa, a once upon a time Sleeping Giant, now rising. We shall extend a hand of partnership and friendship, only when you are willing. NEMRA is a collaboration and partnership of the willing.

3.) The Key Note Speakers, Professor William Bazeyo & Professor John David Kabaasa emphasized the need to leave the comfort zone. Well, Africa has more than enough Research Opportunities. Honestly, where else on Earth can Research be grown like in Africa? The time is fast moving; Africa is building her own capacity - in case you are well, you need to know what to do. This notion was further emphasized in plenary, when Dr. Hammis talked about planning for Africa and with Africa. The Parallel Sessions followed suite. Does God ever sleep in Africa? Or rather when God visits elsewhere, he sleeps in Africa?



Professor William Bazeyo with some of participants at Day 1 of the Conference on -26th March 2024



Dr. Hammis of National Planning Authority after his Keynote address during Day 1 of the conference



Professor John David Kabaasa receives a gift from NEMRA fraternity after his Keynote address on Day 2 of the conference.

4.) There was emphasis on Research as a life style. How come that Africa, the Cradle of human kind apparently is contributing little to the Global Knowledge Economy? Is there conspiracy? Is there self-hate? Not at all. A rising World is freshly beginning with Africa repositioning herself. Africa, beginning with NEMRA is developing her Research Agenda. Please do not be left behind.



Across the different presentations and parallel sessions, some of these aspects and related issues were explored in depth.



Some of the Participants who attended the Conference on Day 2-27th March 2024

3.0 STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

Upon looking ahead, **NEMRA will develop a Research Framework, Partner and Collaborate widely based on humanism "Ubuntu"**. NEMRA is extending her invitation to you for mutual respect, collaboration and partnership with Africa and towards a more humane World. Just do not be scared - that is sometimes how we need to work towards a common agenda and goals.

There is an upcoming issue of **the Natural Ecosystem and the Built Environment**. There is the issue of Reorienting Education to meet the Greater needs of Society.

Rather than focus on the frequency and number of meetings, NEMRA meetings **need to become much more strategic, linked to the NEMRA Higher Education Ecosystem and feeding into processes and policy within Uganda and the Region**. Management meetings should be equally strategic and aligned to National and Regional development goals. There is need to write to further support and strengthen the different Chapters that became prominent in the Conference, such as the Nigeria Chapter, Zimbabwe Chapter, Malawi Chapter and the East African Chapter.

For Uganda, we there is need to harness the original proposal initially brought out by Professor William Bazeyo about forming **an Inter-University Network in Uganda - Linked to NEMRA**. This implies reaching out. The **NEMRA Excom** cannot achieve this objective in isolation and as such will seek out the support of the NEMRA board in this endeavor.

A number of **policies and guidelines are required** - NEMRA needs to solicit for good will ambassadors for these. We propose that the Excom works closely with the Finance NEMRA Representative in developing and launching the Grant Policy and the Financial Mobilization Policy, since these are already required yesterday.

The NEMRA Excom will recast the quarterly newsletter to present and publicize the strategic direction NEMRA is embarking on.

Furthermore, the conference provided a bedrock for ***Demystifying the NEMRA Philosophy and engaging the NEMRA fraternity, with the aim of expanding the network.*** The philosophical orientation of NEMRA identifies with collegiality, evidence – based practice, multi-disciplinary teaching, multi-disciplinary research and multi-disciplinary practice in solving challenges of society. This is expected to promote inter-disciplinary and collaborative practice across professions, promote synergy and relevant policy shifts and in turn to enable sustainable practices. The philosophy is well aligned across the NEMRA Vision, Mission, Objectives and the Activities NEMRA is pursuing.

NEMRA was able to engage beyond her fraternity on all issues pertaining to education, research and networking. The conference became an essential impetus for engaging on new research frontiers, cognizant of the Mission and Vision of NEMRA.

Vision of NEMRA

NEMRA envisages a network of academic researchers advancing a culture of intellectually generated evidence – based policy and practice in Uganda and beyond

Mission of NEMRA

To demystify the issues around doing academic research, develop insights around a wide array of disciplines, share ideas and develop networks in the process of providing solutions to societal problems through research. The fraternity will deliberately pursue expansion in the course of time.

It was agreed that NEMRA is a growing network strengthening research support. Professor Elia Hisali of COBAMS, Makerere echoed that the conference was an opportunity to share experiences and insights that can shape policy directing solutions in a number of Universities and Organizations. How could, for example, NEMRA influence the ecosystem in the member countries and organizations, particularly in

education? How could the research and innovations environment get impacted by NEMRA? The gap between academia, researchers and policy makers requires bridging. There is need for congruence ensuring that the needs of communities and society is what we all address.

NEMRA will continue to win grants, expand the growing number of seminars, expand mentorship, partnership and membership. The organization will further leverage visibility through regular news letters, partnerships and engagements, in country, regionally and globally, Dr. Christine Charity Mwebesa reiterated. Citing from Shakespeare she remarked: "All that begins well ends well".

The Chairperson of NEMRA, Dr. Martin Ongol expressed his delight upon the NEMRA conference bringing on board diverse disciplines. He expressed the commitment of the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST) to continue working with NEMRA, as its Director UNCST is looking at complex research issues that require multidisciplinary teams. He looked upon the conferences' rich abstract menu all tailored towards community development.

Dr. Hammis Mugendawala expressed the commitment of Uganda National Planning authority to continue partnering with NEMRA most significantly in ensuring that the products of research are put to use for development. Highlighting vivid examples and experiences from his work, studies and wide travel, he expressed regret that unfortunately research products continue to gather dust in the libraries of Universities which will have produced them. There are some questions that require attention: Why are there so many Universities neighboring poor communities? Do Universities play a critical role in development? What is the impact of publications? Do Universities carry an inherent link to their history? Did Universities have a false start? He called upon the conference participants to consider looking at Universities as agents of change and to lobby governments to increase funding towards research and development.

Below are some links to some of the conference presentations:

- Media Coverage <https://youtu.be/NuL-1BFHIZM>

- 1st All Africa Multidisciplinary research conference 2024 in pictures
<https://photos.app.goo.gl/tmPYjsToAHMFhH8b9>
- Day 2 opening and Keynote address by Prof. David Kabaasa
<https://youtu.be/2qa-skc5OrU>
- Participants' Presentations <https://youtu.be/b8a6btgfgsU>
- Participants' Presentations <https://youtu.be/wd0MsQenvcA>
- Participants' Presentations <https://youtu.be/XwBlfLevSV4>

Professor Edith Natukunda, the Vice chair, NEMRA Board of Directors thanked everyone who supported the inaugural conference that will be the first one in a series. She recognized the physical presence of delegates from Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Nigeria and Malawi, and appreciated the commitment of those that participated on line.

Overall, within the different conference panel sessions, presentations within diverse fields with implications of multidisciplinary aspects were made. Public health was found to have gender and livelihood aspects; hence, one discipline would not be enough to inform a comprehensive policy. Therefore, strong evidence for policy formulation and community development emerges from multidimensional research. The future NEMRA Conferences should have a clear concept note to encourage papers that highlight these aspects.

4.0 Conference debrief

In order to take stock of the high moments and lessons learned to improve the future conference, a conference debrief meeting was conducted, hosted by the organizing committee.

- The Key Note addresses galvanized the conference and sufficiently raised the banner of the organization, the need to re-orient education to address the changing needs of society and to invest adequately in research, since there is possibly no business with a higher rating than research. Research and innovation

were emphasized, as well as the need to raise the potential of Universities to become more proactive in producing usable knowledge.

- The most significant change was how the conference galvanized the NEMRA fraternity showing the organizational potential across Africa and beyond. The conference was organized in record time and managed on a meagre budget. In this regard, future conferences need to allocate enough time for mobilizing participants and fundraising. The test for team work, collaboration and partnership at the different levels of the organizational pyramid exceeded everyone's expectations. Seventy conference abstracts, eight posters and fifty-five papers were presented. As such some sessions were rushed. Future conferences should consider three to four day conferences.
- Across the parallel sessions, there was inadequate visibility of the main conference theme. There is need to deliberately emphasize the main conference themes, in line with the organizational Mission and Vision, and the local – global contemporary issues.
- The presented papers merit founding and launching the NEMRA journal. This issue needs to be explored by the NEMRA leadership.
- All is well that ends well. The premier NEMRA conference was a great success.

5.0 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NEMRA extends gratitude to the following:

- Uganda Government
- Makerere University
- Conference Delegates
- Members of the Conference Organizing Committee
- Sponsors and the NEMRA board without whom this Conference would not have taken place.