Makerere University’s ResilientAfrica Network maintains 1st position at the Higher Education Solutions Network TechCon 2013

The ResilientAfrica Network (RAN); a partnership of 16 Universities in 20 African countries participated in the TechCon 2013 conference from 16th-18th November in Williamsburg Virginia, USA. This conference was the second annual meeting of the Higher Education Solutions Network (HESN), a program launched in 2012 by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The program was initiated to support the creation of Development Labs at seven top universities¹ both in the US and abroad, catalyzing innovations aimed at solving humanity’s greatest development challenges, ranging from healthcare and food security to chronic conflict. Makerere prides in being the only African University that was selected as part of the USAID Higher Education Solutions Network (HESN).

TechCon 2013, provided a great opportunity for representatives from each of the seven HESN universities, students, academics, development experts, field practitioners, entrepreneurs, and investors from the private sector to come together and discuss key innovations being developed to address some community challenges globally. Henry Jewel, the Program Manager at Akvo emphasized the fact that technology could be used to find solutions to global challenges. “Technology is sometimes the easiest part of the solution, the hard part are the processes and systems around it”.

¹ University of California, Berkeley, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Duke University, The College of William and Mary’s AidData Center for Development Policy, Texas A&M University, Makerere University and Michigan State University
Makerere won the grant of $25 million to lead efforts by African Universities to create community-focused, innovative solutions that result in African communities that are resilient to shocks and stresses that result from natural and man-made disasters such as landslides, famine, drought and conflict. This time round, Makerere students who have received support from RAN had an opportunity to present their community-driven innovations. HESN partners participated in the competition, which started in the innovations market place. Uganda was represented by Nelson Waswa with his Water4lyf innovation which is a Mobile-based water testing kit that assesses the quality of water, maps visualization of clean and unsafe water and also assesses the water infrastructure after Natural Disasters; and Brian Gitta’s Matibabu, an mHealth application that uses a non-invasive method to diagnose malaria. The Matibabu application qualified for round 2 of the competition among the best 4 that were shortlisted after round 1 (The College of William and Mary’s AidData Center for Development Policy, University of California, Berkeley, Duke University and Makerere University). Round 2 involved a pitching contest with an international panel of judges grilling the final four teams, after which the entire audience at the HESN voted for their preferred innovation. It was at this point that Makerere University was declared the winner, followed by The College of William and Mary’s AidData Center for Development Policy, University of California, Berkeley and
Duke University. Texas A&M was also recognized for the best thematic area/idea on conflict resolution.

The team behind the winning Matibabu innovation comprises of five young talented students drawn from different colleges from Makerere University – Brian Gitta, Josiah Kavuma and Joshua Businge from the College of Computing & Information Sciences, and Simon Lubambo and Alvin Kabwama from the College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology, demonstrating the power of multidisciplinary collaboration. Through RAN’s support, the team has also benefitted from technical advice and support from faculty members from the School of Public Health, and local and international private sector mentors.

Brian Gitta, who ably represented the Matibabu team at the event, and was the top favorite of all the judges, shared his innovation with lots of passion; while putting emphasis on the need to develop local innovative solutions to community challenges. “Let us not wait for other people to develop solutions for us, Africans understand best the challenges in Africa and so, we as Africans are the eligible persons to come up with solutions to African challenges.” Prof. David Serwada-RAN Technical Advisor did not hesitate to share that “Henceforth, we will display and share real work, the impact of African generated solutions to African community challenges”.

Prof William Bazeyo, the Dean Makerere University School of Public Health/ Project Chief of Party when requested to comment had this to say, “RAN is committed to changing the lives of Africans and creating resilient communities. But I add quickly that we are not starting from zero, we are building on other initiatives that have been led by USAID and other Development Partners in Africa. There is a lot on the ground but this is the time for the universities to move to the communities, work with them and partner to create resilient communities, families and individuals. We look forward to working with Governments and the private sector”.
The meeting was characterized by a number of activities and addresses. Some of the inspirational speakers included Dr. Alex Dehgan (Director, USAID Office of Science and Technology/Chief Scientist at USAID), Andrew Turner (CTO, Esri R&D Center), Andrew Natsios (Director, Scowcroft Institute; Professor, George H. W. Bush School of Government and Public Service; Former USAID Administrator), Brian Murrow (Associate Partner - Business Analytics and Optimization at IBM) among others.

Dr. Alex Dehgan reiterated HESN’s commitment to supporting innovators in their quest for credible solutions to their unique set of challenges. RAN aims at promoting not only the innovation but the innovator as well. “It takes great risks and great failures to lead and create great innovations,” emphasized Dr. Alex Dehgan.
The team that won at HESN TechCon 2013 made Makerere, RAN, Uganda and the entire African continent proud

For more information please visit www.usaid.gov/hesn, www.ranlab.org and twitter.com/AfricaResilient

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