

**Leaders in the Civic Engagement Movement: Olive Mugenda, Vice-Chancellor of Kenyatta University and member of the Talloires Network Steering Committee**  
by John Pollock



Professor Olive Mugenda's commitment to social responsibility is rooted in her own childhood experience. "I grew up in a single mother household, and my mother struggled to put me and my siblings through school." She also points out the importance of help she received early in life as a motivating factor for focusing on social responsibility to those who are less fortunate. "When I got my masters, I did it through a scholarship. This demonstrated to me how important it is to give opportunities to those who are less fortunate. You never know, you could be helping a future President or future Vice-Chancellor."

During Professor Mugenda's seven years as Vice-Chancellor of Kenyatta University, the institution has grown dramatically in enrollment and facilities. It has also increased its community engagement and social responsibility work. For example, Kenyatta established the Orphan and Vulnerable Students Fund to provide tuition support to orphans, students from poor families, and those from marginalized regions, allowing them to study at Kenyatta. Mugenda notes that these students "are able to improve their quality of life, and the quality of life of their families." In addition, for the past four years Kenyatta has had funding from a major Kenyan bank to support students in undertaking service projects.

Mugenda noted that the greatest challenge for Kenyatta's social responsibility work is resources. Although the university has tremendous human resources that can accomplish a lot with limited funding, other programs need additional financial resources. "Public universities in Kenya don't get a lot of funding from government due to competing needs, and government doesn't give money for community engagement." Therefore, Kenyatta is increasingly trying to raise awareness among companies and private citizens of the need for financial support to university community engagement programs.

When asked if she had any advice for university leaders hoping to increase the social responsibility of their institutions, she emphasized the need to seek third-stream funding to support engagement work, outside of government grants and fees. "You should look for income from individuals or companies. Talk to people, network, and write proposals. If you have a good concept, be persistent in seeking funding for it." Professor Mugenda also pointed out the necessity of getting staff buy-in. "You can't do it alone. You need staff and students. You must get buy-in from your team. Even if you have the money, you need the people to implement the work."

Professor Mugenda pointed out that the challenges of poverty around the world present an opportunity for universities to engage with their communities. "For example, 60% of children passing secondary school in Kenya cannot go to university due to space in public universities.

What can we do to make sure these children access higher education?" Poor access to health care is another opportunity for universities with medical schools. For example, Kenyatta's medical school mounts camps for health checkup within the surrounding communities. The University has a dynamic Community Outreach Directorate that organizes services for the poor. Kenyatta is also building a 600 bed teaching hospital to help provide greater access to health care.

When asked about her vision for the future of the university civic engagement movement, Professor Mugenda discussed her hope that universities do more to make a difference in the communities around them. "Right now, a lot of universities are struggling to get funding just to keep the university afloat. They need to go beyond that and try to look at communities around them and improve livelihoods." Professor Mugenda noted that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to community engagement, and that strategies must be context specific. Therefore, she recommended that the Talloires Network carefully study the needs of universities and communities in various regions around the world to help design more effective strategies for civic engagement in different contexts.

Professor Olive Mugenda has been the Vice-Chancellor of Kenyatta University since 2006. Her career at Kenyatta has included serving as Head of Department, Dean of Faculty, Deputy Vice-Chancellor and now the first female Vice-Chancellor of a public university in East Africa. Professor Mugenda obtained a Bachelor of Education (First Class Honors) from the University of Nairobi in 1979. She obtained her masters and PhD degrees in Family Studies and Consumer Economics from Iowa State University (USA) and a Masters degree in Business Administration (MBA) from ESAMI, Arusha, Tanzania. She has supervised numerous Masters and PhD theses, won several research grants, and served as technical adviser to numerous workshops in and outside Africa. She has undertaken many research projects and is currently working on a project on Improving the Performance of Girls in Science and Mathematics in Secondary Schools that has been nominated for a Commonwealth Education Award. She has published a number of scholarly papers and books and she has received several awards. Professor Mugenda serves on the board of regional and global bodies including the Association of African Universities (Board Member) and the International Association of Universities (Vice-President).