

Africa: Ministers Reaffirm Science, Technology and Innovation Commitments

Nairobi — The first African Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for Youth Employment, Human Capital Development and Inclusive Growth has concluded with ministers announcing a range of resolutions to harness ST&I for sustainable development.

Initiatives to solve societal problems in areas such as water, health, information and communication technologies (ICTs), renewable energy and agriculture were also agreed at yesterday's ministerial meeting, attended by 57 government ministers with responsibility for science, technology and innovation, finance, planning and education.

They pledged to use ST&I as a driver for inclusive growth and youth empowerment, with a focus on entrepreneurship, through strengthened support for innovation and entrepreneurship programs.

They also agreed to develop, review and implement ST&I policies, laws and strategies, to strengthen scientific research by promoting and increasing investment in collaborative research at the national, regional and intra-regional levels, and to support institutions and human capacity building in research for development (R&D).

The meeting issued a formal "Nairobi Ministerial Declaration on STI", which was guided by a commitment reached in 2006 by African Union leaders for countries to devote at least one per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) to R&D. The ministers resolved that all African countries honour this commitment, and set in place national ST&I policies, by 2015.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is already working with more than 20 African countries to review existing ST&I policies in order to develop national frameworks to help achieve these outcomes.

UNESCO is also strengthening the capacity of researchers, policymakers, development partners and the private sector.

"We need much stronger linkages between science and policy," said Irina Bokova, UNESCO's director-general. "We need an integrated scientific research agenda to better understand the world, to identify boundaries and tipping points. Africa is on the move today. ST&I is vital to maintaining this momentum."

Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki told the ministerial meeting: "Africa is currently experiencing rapid economic growth. To compete effectively in the global market we must be able to develop technologies that will set off Africa's industrial revolution."

He said his government has already formulated a new National Science, Technology and Innovation Policy with an aim to create indigenous science, technology and innovation capacities to meet Kenya's needs, priorities and resources.

On the final day of the forum, Kibaki also presented awards to five Kenyans who had exhibited innovations at the venue in Nairobi, in fields ranging from ICT applications to

agriculture. The president said many world-leading innovations are emerging from across Africa, but more needed to be done to make the continent a global innovations hub.

Donald Kaberuka, president of the African Development Bank said it was also important for Africa to commercialise its own innovations.

"We need to expand financial services for innovation. I am so delighted that this conference focused on innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as on science and research and development," he said.

The ministerial meeting also received pledges from some ministers to ensure their governments allocated more resources to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in higher education, and to strengthen regional networks through partnerships, and collaborations between developing African countries and with the global North.

Naledi Pandor, South Africa's science and technology minister, said the continent also needed to transform its views on the value of science and technology.

She said many governments were not emphasising ST&I or allocating enough resources because "science is still viewed in a traditional way, in a technical way and not [as] a development tool".

"It is important for our governments to identify productive researchers and not 'wild talkers', and fully support them. Infrastructure should also be put in place to for them to do their work," Pandor said.

She said South Africa is the only African country that devotes a full one per cent of GDP to R&D, and that other countries needed to help support African research institutions.

"We are finding that ... it is becoming almost a burden for South Africa," she said.

Conference host Kenya indicated it would look to increase its ST&I budget to one per cent in the coming financial year.

"If Kenya is going to be an advocate it must lead by example. I can assure you that parliament will pass it when the minister presents it," said Peter Anyang Nyong'o, Minister for Medical Services in Kenya.

But significant doubts remain whether funding pledges will be delivered on once the ministers returned home, in the absence of any institutions to enforce pledges - and due to the fact that most Africans are self-employed, and many do not or are unable to pay tax.

"Sixty per cent of Africans work in the informal sector. We can only attain the one per cent of GDP from our budgets if we move them to the formal sector, tax them and channel back the resources to finance R&D," said Fred Omach, Uganda's state finance minister.

For more news and analysis of the Africa ST&I Forum, see our dedicated [blog](#).