

Africa Sci-Tech Forum Calls for Less Talk, More Development

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Photo: Reuters

African Development Bank President Donald Kaberuka gives a speech at the annual meeting of the bank in Lisbon, Portugal, June 2011.

African ministers met Tuesday in Nairobi, Kenya, for the third and final day of a science and technology forum. The assembled officials demanded more concrete action from governments to boost high-tech development in the continent.

One of the overriding themes of the first Africa Science, Technology and Innovation Forum in Nairobi is that people are sick of conferences.

“There are far too many conferences on one or the other of Africa's development issues, which we are condemned to attend. We therefore should be allowed to ask, why yet another conference? That would be the justified question,” said Donald Kaberuka, president of the African Development Bank, one of the sponsors of the forum.

He was addressing nearly 60 ministers from African countries who had gathered to discuss ways to promote a more ambitious high-tech agenda for the continent.

As Kaberuka jokingly suggested, there have been plenty of meetings, initiatives, proposals and action plans for African development over the past decade, and people are tired of talking.

But he said this meeting is important, as it presents African ministers with a challenge to transform their economies from being reliant on minerals and natural resources, to being driven by innovation and sustainable, modern industry.

“You'll appreciate, therefore, the importance of this gathering, our shared firm belief that Africa will move forward only on the basis of mastering the power to create wealth, not only seeking to live off of finite inherited resources. The purpose of our being here today is a search for an actionable road to that end,” said Kaberuka.

Kaberuka paused from his remarks for a moment to congratulate Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki for the recent discovery of oil in his country. Whether he intended the remark to be ironic or not, a ripple of laughter went through crowd.

Despite numerous calls for decisive action to boost development in science and technology, the Nairobi forum was particularly soft in its agenda.

The aims of the conference included “taking stock” of the African Union's 2005 Consolidated Plan of Action for Science and Technology and “encouraging” the role of research and development.

Naledi Pandor, the Chairperson of the African Ministerial Conference for Science and Technology, also called for concrete action.

She said now it is up to the governments to actually provide funding so countries can implement plans that were already agreed to at past meetings.

“Because without adequate resourcing we can not do that which they demand of us. We can't be paper ministries without resources supporting key actions in these important sectors,” said Pandor.

In 2006, the African Union set a goal for countries to spend at least 1 percent of their gross domestic product on research and development. So far, only two or three countries have reached that target.

Africa has produced some groundbreaking technology in the past.

Speaking to the assembled ministers, President Kibaki reflected on Kenya's own success in developing mobile phone technology, which includes the invention of the world's first mobile banking system.

He said innovations like this will help sustain Africa's booming economic growth.

“There is an urgent need for innovative technology to spur this growth to the next level. Indeed, in order to compete effectively in the global market, we must be able to develop technologies that will set off Africa's industrial revolution,” said Kibaki.

Then, undoing any sense of urgency, and underscoring the feeling that this conference also would be more talk than action, Kibaki officially opened the ministerial forum, just two-and-a-half hours before it was scheduled to end.