

Africa Sci-tech Forum Promotes Homegrown Innovation

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Photo: Reuters

Jeremiah Murimi, a Kenyan electrical engineering student demonstrates how a "smart charger" connected to a bicycle can power a mobile phone (file photo).

Experts and officials gathered at the first Africa Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation in Nairobi, Kenya are seeking African solutions to African problems. Participants are calling for African governments to fund and promote research and development at home.

U.N. Economic Commission for Africa Technology Division Director Aida Opolu-Mensah says for too long Africa's science and technology agenda has been set by the continent's development partners.

Need to be in the "driving seat"

"Therefore, if Africa is the new pole of growth, then Africa has to be in the driving seat. And Africa has to invest its own resources in the science and technology that they want to use in order to achieve this new growth."

Speaking at the start of the forum Sunday, Opoku-Mensah called for African countries to fund science and technology programs from their national budgets, rather than to rely on "gifts" from international partners.

In 2006, the African Union set a target for all member countries to spend at least one percent of their gross domestic product on science research and development. According to research from an A.U. development program, known as NEPAD, only Uganda, Malawi and South Africa have reached that target.

African economies have grown explosively during the past decade, and are predicted to continue expanding by most estimates. The International Monetary Fund expects African economies to grow by nearly six percent this year.

Growth versus development

But as African Development Bank Vice President Kamal El Khesten points out, growth does not

necessarily equate to development.

“This growth was not sufficiently inclusive, indeed, in spite of double-digit growth rates in many countries, the phenomenon of jobless growth has become an increasing cause of concern. Our challenge is to address the mismatch between skills development and the actual requirements of the labor market.”

One of the central themes of the conference is youth employment. El Khesten said the continent needs to invest more in higher education to prepare students for jobs in science and technology.

More than one panelist noted the Arab Spring revolutions were fueled in part by frustration over rampant unemployment, and warned that Africa could experience a similar uprising.

There is no shortage of advice and guidance on science and technology development in Africa. The African Union has made numerous declarations on the subject, starting with the 2005 consolidated plan of action. The United Nations has its own recommendations, as do most international development agencies working in the continent.

Putting ideas into action

Association for the Development of Education in Africa Chairman Dzingai Mutumbuka says many of these good ideas are never put into action. He hopes this forum will be different.

“The takeaway here is that it is time, it is time, that we as Africans move away from lofty conference resolutions to implementation, implementation, and implementation.”

In addition to simply discussing best practices and policy for science and technology development, the forum hopes to take some concrete actions, including designing possible responses to water, energy and biodiversity needs in Africa.

The forum wraps up Tuesday with a ministerial meeting