

Universities "must address youth unemployment in Africa"

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Aida Opoku-Mensah, UNECA director, addressing the forum

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[NAIROBI] Senior officials at an all-Africa conference on science and technology in Kenya have said that if high levels of youth unemployment across the African continent are to be successfully reduced, innovation and entrepreneurship need to be included in university curricula.

The proposal was made at the first Africa Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for Youth Unemployment, Human Capital Development and Inclusive Growth, which is taking place (1–3 April) in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.

The forum is being attended by government ministers, university leaders and academics, civil society organisations, public officials and members of the private sector, and will conclude with a ministerial meeting tomorrow.

"This meeting is timely in addressing the role of [science and technology](#) in Africa in expanding the opportunities for all and addressing youth unemployment in particular," said Aida Opoku-Mensah, director of the ICT, Science and Technology Division at the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA).

Around 40 per cent of Africans of working age are young people – but nearly two-thirds are unemployed, underemployed, or unemployable due to issues such as illiteracy and inappropriate education, the conference heard.

It was also told that youth unemployment was among the contributing factors to the social and political unrest of the Arab Spring, which has led to demonstrations and violence in several North African countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Tunisia and Yemen, and in some instances resulted in changes of government.

"[Some of] the youth that went out there [to protest] were not from poor communities. These were educated, qualified people asking for jobs," said Khadija Khoudari, an education expert from the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).

"Local labour markets could not absorb these youths. We need to link the curriculum to the market needs."

Delegates heard calls for Africa to bridge the gap between the continent's [universities](#) and the industrial sector, with more systematic and regular collaboration in science and technology.

Such collaboration should also engage young people with ST&I through [internship programmes](#), and those who take part should be provided with [seed money](#) to commercialise products they are involved in designing and developing.

"The [education](#) system plays a vital role in human capital development, innovation and entrepreneurship. However, the education system, both formal and informal, must embrace the culture of innovation and entrepreneurship," said Aida Opoku-Mensah.

Margaret Kamar, Kenya's Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology, said the forum needed to [convince relevant government ministers](#) in Africa that new research initiatives would provide genuine solutions to problems facing the continent.

"Convince us and we [will] provide the money. We are ready to take off," Kamar told the conference on the opening day.

The opening session heard success stories from several African countries, including Ethiopia, Rwanda and Zambia, which have launched programmes aimed at reducing youth unemployment through science, technology and innovation.

In Zambia, a national competition is organised each year to enable secondary school students to develop new and innovative prototypes across a range of technologies.

Ethiopia has also registered some significant successes. "We are focusing on skills development, building this into education systems and [focusing on the] availability of water," said Mahamouda Ahmed Gaas, Science and Technology State Minister in Ethiopia.

In an interview with *SciDev.Net*, Gaas said water had been chosen as a focus because every household relies heavily on its nearest water source, whether it be a spring, well or river, for irrigation and clean water.

"So water technology is the first thing we are doing to raise [interest in] technology. We are directing our innovation towards [solving this] problem," he said.

The conference also heard that at the continent-wide level, UNECA has established the African Innovation Framework, which identifies key strategies for taking advantage of emerging technological niches.

UNECA has also established a Science, Technology and Innovation Endowment Fund to support innovators commercialise their discoveries. Rwanda has introduced a similar fund based on UNECA's model.