

ECA and Partners Commit to Fast Tracking Africa's R&D



Addis Ababa, 11 March 2008 (ECA) – “Strong linkages are needed between industry and S&T to prioritize innovation as part of the broader strategy to improve market competitiveness of Africa's products,” said UN Under Secretary-General and ECA's Executive Secretary, Mr. Abdou Jannet to participants attending the closing session of the Science and Africa Conference, held from 3-7 March 2008.

In a speech read on his behalf by his Deputy, Ms. Lalla Ben Barka, he noted that proposals made by participants for increasing R&D capacities will need collaboration with partners from both the North and South, including the EU, Korea and India, “who have fully demonstrated their commitment to supporting Africa by their presence here,” he said.

He noted a number of challenges that will require urgent solutions by the community of researchers, scientists and policy-makers, including the thorny international Intellectual Property Regimes (IPRs). These need to be more development friendly so that we can harness knowledge from existing patents and better utilize international opportunities for our advancement,” he said, pointing out the efforts by developing countries in the World Intellectual Property Organization to include issues such as indigenous knowledge rights in the IPR regime.

On his part, Dr. Abdul Hakim from the African Union Commission (AUC) told participants that in implementing its Consolidated Plan of Action on Science and Technology, AUC is working hard to see to it that Africa's economies are driven by science. “We need collaborate on solutions that alleviate poverty through more problem-solving R&D and produces that bring value to society”, he said adding, “We should secure our part in the global economy by seeking to be driven by knowledge and skills and be able to use less land for more products, less water and less chemicals.”

The Conference came up with innovative ideas and suggestions across the board in areas such as Energy, Transport, Infrastructure, ICT, Health, Life Sciences, Agriculture/Climate Change and Water. Mr. Jannet lauded the visionary effort by the AU to develop a policy framework in this regard and re-affirmed ECAs readiness to work in partnership with AU to fast track work in this area.

Speaking to the media, Ms. Aida Opoku-Mensah reiterated the issue of IPR as key to Africa's growth. “The global rights regime is dominated by interests, which contradict our African cultural values on ownership, she said. Giving the example of the Ghanaian Kente cloth whose weaving and patterns are passed on through community knowledge and ownership, she said this was not patented until recently. “Global regimes focus on the private inventor and this is why we need to find ways in which community knowledge and culture is valued and protected”, she said cautioning that if Africa does not pay attention, “the whole global economy will squeeze, not just the scientists, but our artists as well”.

The Conference Rapporteur, Prof. Sospeter Muhongo from the International Council for Science said Africa has abounding resources, which must be tapped into more effectively. In the area of safe and clean water, he noted that Bangladesh and Mongolia are better at giving access to clean water than Africa, urging that the two poor countries have demonstrated what is possible in difficult circumstances. “We need to address our water governance issues given that 95% of usable fresh water is ground water.” He said.

As partners in the Science and Africa initiative, ECA and AUC agreed on the importance of engaging Africa's top policy-makers in supporting R&D for development on the continent through the use of existing machineries and structures with member States. On its part ECA will table the outcomes of the conference at the joint ECA/AU Conference of Ministers of Economy and Finance and Ministers of Finance, Planning and Economic Development due to take place from 26 March to 2 April, 2008 in Addis Ababa.

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