

Science and technological innovation critical for Africa's economic growth

05 March 2008 (ECA) - "The scale of the challenge facing Africa in the area of science and technology is huge but it can be overcome with vision, commitment and unwavering determination," said UN Under-Secretary General and ECA's Executive Secretary Mr. Abdoulie Janneh at the opening of the *Science with Africa Conference*, organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) in collaboration with the African Union (AU).

The conference, taking place from 3-7 March 2008, aims to explore how African scientists can increase their collaboration and participation in international science initiatives and research and development projects as well as promote the use of science and technology in the African development process.

Speaking to the gathering of scientists, scholars, international research partners, policymakers and entrepreneurs, he said that Africa is the only region yet to fully exploit the great potentials of using science and technology as an engine of growth and development.

"This is not due to neglect", said Janneh, pointing out that at the International level, the World Summit Outcome pointed to the crucial role of Science and Technology in accomplishing the Millennium Development Goals while the implementation plan of the World Summit on Sustainable Development spelt out the importance of science-based decision-making.

He highlighted a number of fundamental challenges, facing the development of science and technology in Africa, including low science and technology capacity, low investment in research and development, inadequate regulatory regimes, poor infrastructural base and a lack of access to helpful scientific ideas.

"A recent study by ECA confirms that research and development funding in Africa is still lower than 1% of its GDP." He said.

He nevertheless pointed out a number of positive indications in the recent past, notably the intention to increase budgetary allocations in research and development by the governments of South Africa, Uganda and Ghana in their 2006-2007 budgets.

He asked participants to consider strong linkages between industry and science as a way of engaging in the changing innovation process and the need for mechanisms for patent regimes to be subjected to scrutiny as they play a complex role in encouraging innovation and enhancing market entry and job creation. He also called for a critical look at regional and international cooperation for implementing collaborative science projects.

Also addressing the gathering was UNESCO's Director General, who pointed out three main R&D challenges in a speech read on his behalf by his representative, Mr. Nureldin Satti. These include the need for sound science policies, building of human and institutional capacities in science and the establishment of knowledge sharing networks in science.

Further, he called for the need for science and technology to be more gender responsive. "Science and technology is often the domain for men and women are largely under-represented", he said, urging governments to support the inclusion of more women decision makers to bring their contribution to bear on science and technology policy.

African Union's (AU) Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology Prof. Nagia M. Essayed assured participants of the institution's commitment to science and technology, noting that the January 2007 AU Summit was held on this theme. AU's plan of action is to promote human resource development, capacity building and science and technology as tools for socio-economic development

Ms Beate Wilhelm, Head of the thematic and knowledge department from Swiss Development Corporation (SDC) a key ECA partner told participants that despite increased access to global knowledge through information and communication technologies, the return on investment is still marginal due to the missing link of translating knowledge into effective products. SDC is supporting the "Ideas factory" at the Conference, which she noted will be a market place for forging relations and exchange of ideas to boost African science and innovative systems.

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