

comment

Diasporas of hope

*Talented scientists living in Africa's 'sixth region' are an untapped resource, says **Fred Oladeinde***

The crucial role that science and technology can play in Africa's socio-economic transformation, development and integration into the global economy is no longer in dispute. What is worrisome is the slow pace at which some African governments and the private sector are investing or committing to the effort.

It is time to mobilise Africa's pool of talented scientists, including those in the Diaspora; time to nurture and develop young scientific minds, both male and female; and time for both the public and private sectors to make bold financial commitments in support of technological innovation to advance economic freedom and prosperity on the continent.

This was the key message issued at the end of the 9th annual AfriCANDO summit dedicated to science, technology and research for Africa's development held at Florida Memorial University in Miami from 19 to 22 July. Although there has been much rhetoric and as many conferences as pronouncements on the subject before, this particular gathering, sponsored in part by the African Union (AU) human resources, science and technology department, ushered in a new era of coop-

eration between Africans in the Diaspora and the AU.

As African Union commissioner for human resources, science and technology Nagia Essayed noted in her opening remarks, "It is encouraging to see that the current trends of science and technology development in Africa are taking a new, exciting dimension. This is demonstrated by the unwavering commitment of African governments, non-governmental organisations, Africans in the Diaspora and the international community to develop science and technology in Africa."

The fact that some of Africa's best scientists, engineers, health professionals and economists based in the western hemisphere are conferring passionately with their colleagues from the Diaspora and AU officials to devise strategies and programmes to advance science, technology and economic freedom in Africa is testimony that a new development paradigm is imminent.

A key document for discussion at the summit was Africa's Consolidated Science and Technology Plan of Action, an AU-Nepad road map outlining the critical role of scientific research and technology in the continent's development. It underscores Africa's commitment to

Fostering our future

*The first campus of the African Institute of Science and Technology in Abuja will bring prosperity to the region and stability to the continent, argues **Boubou Cisse***

The African Institute of Science and Technology (AIST) is no longer just a dream for the economies of sub-Saharan Africa. With the campus design in the process of being finalised and recruitment set to begin early next year, this world-class faculty is making tremendous progress towards the goal of opening its first campus in Abuja by 2008. AIST is one of the best hopes yet for prosperity in the region.

So far, around \$23 million has been committed from oil companies towards the endowment that will fund operations in Abuja. A further \$120m remains to be collected by 2008, rising to \$250m in 2013. The project is currently receiving financial support from multilateral organisations, as well as local and international governments. Once building is completed, however, other private organisations are expected to help, too.

Locally, Nigeria has been a major donor. The host country has given \$40m towards purchasing the land and another \$5m to help build the campus. The World Bank

has given seed money and will continue to give grants towards the project to ensure its positive growth and continued momentum. Many international multilateral organisations such as the African Development Bank, EU and G8 are also expected to provide financial support.

Many companies have indicated interest in supporting the programme by way of internships, scholarships, prizes and by paying to name buildings, classrooms and departments. These include GE, Hewlett-Packard, Exxon, Dunlop, Schlumberger and many more.

THE RECRUITMENT of faculty staff will begin in early 2007, with every effort made to populate the faculty with the best minds available. To ensure this, an independent scientific advisory board has been set up, made up of nine scientists from premier universities around the world, including Princeton, the Indian Institute of Technology and the African Academy of Science. The African Science Committee will also be involved in choosing the faculty

common objectives to develop and use science and technology for socio-economic transformation of the continent and its integration into the global economy through capacity building, knowledge production and technological innovation.

Participants made ten recommendations to be submitted to the meeting of African heads of state in January 2007. These include setting up a Diaspora Development Fund to finance research projects, establishing study abroad exchange programmes and a summer exchange programme to send African scientists and professionals from the Diaspora to Africa and from Africa to the Diaspora for short-term assignments.

AFRICANS IN THE DIASPORA have also, for the first time, been officially recognised as AU constituents, to be consulted on all affairs of the Union through the 2003 3q amendment to its constitution.

The formation of the Western Hemisphere African Diaspora Network (WHADN) in 2002 was a strategic step in this new partnership, which now has the Diaspora and Africans on the continent poised to embark on significant scientific and technological transformation. WHADN is a network of non-governmental, civil society and other organisations working toward implementing

article 3q by making the African Diaspora the AU's sixth region. The network is already crisscrossing campuses to drum up support for and interest and pride in Africa.

As Florida Memorial University president Karl S Wright noted at the opening of the conference, America's historically black colleges and universities are among the top producers of engineers and scientists in the United States. These institutions should play a critical role in developing and strengthening science, technology and research in Africa.

The spirit of government-NGO-business cooperation underlying the new AU-WHADN and private sector partner-

ship has long been absent in Africa, but is a welcome new beginning. The lessons of China and Thailand, two countries that have engaged their citizens abroad in their economic transformation, are worth noting in efforts to sustainably develop science and technology in Africa. Examples of technological innovation as the engine that launched the economy in Europe are also worth remembering as new steps are made towards creating linkages that will help develop Africa.

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and selecting appropriate curricula.

Established African institutes have been consulted to further improve the education AIST can give its future students. Should these institutes agree to become AIST-affiliated, they will receive grants to improve their schools' infrastructure and curricula.

Burkina Faso is upgrading its International Institute of Water and Environmental Engineering to become a world-class AIST-affiliated school with capital coming from the World Bank and the French, Swiss and Danish governments. And more schools are likely to come on board as the AIST gains momentum.

WHILE AIST HAS made great progress, many issues remain to be addressed in the coming months. Students who graduate from AIST will be sought by the world market. Being an oil-rich country, Nigeria can offer competitive wages to limit a brain drain, but what of other countries where AIST will set up activities? The students who graduate from the AIST schools will become some of Africa's greatest assets, so keeping them on the conti-

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ment through various incentives has to be a priority.

There are ways of doing this. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in the US keeps its young talent by facilitating product development for students' inventions, if professors believe them to be innovative. The student receives a percentage of the profits, is more encouraged to stay with the programme and thereby creates more revenue for the school. This is a model that could be considered for AIST.

Furthermore, though not impossible, building the entire university campus by 2008—in less than 18 months—is a challenge. And it will be crucial for the institute's board of directors to ensure that the poor governance that has plagued African institutions and compromised development does not surface at AIST.

But challenges aside, there is no doubt that the creation of AIST is one of the greatest initiatives yet for the people of Africa. It will develop Africa's best minds, giving them opportunities to bring prosperity and stability to the continent.

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