

Regional Initiative in Science and Education Workshop

Nairobi, June 3-5, 2007

Opening Remarks

By Hon. Noah Wekesa, M.P.

Minister for Science and Technology

Mr. Chairman,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is my great pleasure to be with you today to speak on issues of science and technology capacity in sub-Saharan Africa.

Many of us assembled here may be aware of the myriad challenges posed to sub-Saharan Africa by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and insecurity. We may also be equally aware of the potential contribution of science and technology in addressing and overcoming these challenges to ultimately achieve growth in Africa.

Mr. Chairman, over the last few decades, science and technology have tremendously advanced and presented opportunities to developing countries to advance their national developments. However, for the majority of sub-Saharan African countries, a lack of adequate science and technology capacity has hampered the mastering, adaptation and utilization of such advances.

Those decades also witnessed a number of international programs focusing on the development of science and technology capacity in developing countries, including those in sub-Saharan Africa. These programs were implemented specifically to enable the countries to use scientific knowledge. The programs viewed capacity for scientific research and science education as being particularly important because, among many other uses, science is central to producing and validating information for national and international policymaking.

On its own merit, scientific research offers a powerful means for developing shared, transnational understandings of human interest and endeavor. Drawing from the experiences in environmental management, for example, it is evident that since the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, science has commonly been employed to promote shared interests in global environmental protection. In this

connection, scientific research has provided objective descriptions of public policy problems such as environmental change and yielded potential solutions in the form of technological developments or economic instruments useful for securing universal assent across national boundaries. Thus, scientific research and science education capacities are core and essential components of national and international scientific and technological capacity.

Ladies and Gentlemen, despite its importance, scientific research is typically an expensive affair. It involves high startup costs and requires investments in highly skilled personnel, laboratories and field investigations. Obviously, poor sub-Saharan Africa would certainly find difficulty in meeting these requirements and achieving economies of scale. Therefore, it is only logical that scientific research activities in sub-Saharan Africa be organized, planned and implemented taking advantage of the capacities and capabilities existing in individual countries within a regional framework.

Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen, the many initiatives related to science and technology in sub-Saharan Africa have, in my belief, resulted in ample scientific research expertise and infrastructure for different science areas relevant to the development needs of the countries. The exploitation of these capacities within a regional framework would increase competitiveness and optimize scientific opportunities for sub-Saharan Africa.

Clearly, sub-Saharan Africa needs to not only acknowledge the importance of science and technology for development, but it must also provide supporting infrastructure and encourage links between public institutions and industrial firms, drawing on external support where necessary. In view of the foregoing observations, a need exists for fostering regional networks that support the utilization of the available science and technology resources and facilities. This is in order to enhance and optimize the development and application of science and technology in sub-Saharan Africa.

Regional networks for scientific research and training in sub-Saharan Africa are desirable as a means to enhance the region's capacity to effectively link knowledge to action. Such networks will serve to provide better understanding and knowledge of conditions in the region important to understanding the global dynamics of problems such as environmental change and its consequences, thus aiding the development of relevant global policies. Additionally, the networks would pool together knowledge developed in indigenous research institutions that better reflects the needs and priorities identified by local political processes for sustainable development. For this reason, the knowledge content of the networks may gain higher credibility among local policymakers and the public than those developed by external bodies.

In terms of enhancing sub-Saharan Africa's participation in international science and technology, the networks can be expected to promote scientific research capacity of countries, scientists and policymakers in sub-Saharan Africa to significantly contribute to the effectiveness, transparency and legitimacy of global policies.

Luckily, under the auspices of the African Union, comprehensive consultations and discussions have yielded a new framework under which regional networks for scientific and technological activities can be developed. This avenue is the Africa's Science and Technology Consolidated Plan of Action, developed by the New Partnership for Africa's Development in 2005. The Plan has the overall goals of enabling Africa to harness and apply science, technology and related innovations to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development; and ensuring that Africa contributes to the global pool of scientific knowledge and technological innovation.

The Plan focuses on the improvement of infrastructure; enhancing institutional and policy frameworks; strengthening human resource bases; improving the quality and intensity of regional cooperation; building a strong political and civil science constituency; and promoting innovative ways and means of financing science and technology in Africa. Efforts under the Plan will be undertaken through national and regional investments, as well as international partnerships, to strengthen the continent's STI capacity.

At this point, Mr. Chairman, I wish to inform the workshop of my pleasure on noting the desire of the Science Initiative Group (SIG) to contribute to scientific capacity development in sub-Saharan Africa. In view of the effort already made under NEPAD, I wish to very much encourage the Group's effort and observe that its intention is complementary to the Science and Technology Consolidated Plan of Action. It will certainly find favor and support in many countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr. Chairman, I wish to encourage sub-Saharan Africa to explore and take advantage of existing North-South partnerships to build its science and technology capacity. Starting at the national level, a framework for interactively linking the collective capacity of networks of universities, research institutes and government organizations can be developed as a national system for innovation. This may then be extended to regional networks for innovation involving a number of states.

As a way forward in these and other efforts aimed at enhancing sub-Saharan Africa's science and technology capacity, wide and comprehensive consultations among stakeholders on issues due for consideration are necessary for obtaining stakeholder acceptance, consensus and eventual ownership of the initiatives in the region. I see this workshop as a part of the stakeholder consultation about the Science Initiative Group's intention on scientific capacity building. I wish to urge that participants take the opportunity during the workshop to identify and consider issues including the broad scientific research and training priorities for the region that should be part of a shared comprehensive regional development framework.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Participants, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I now wish to thank you for your attention and wish you successful deliberations.

Thank you.