



SOUTH AFRICA MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, DR BLADE NZIMANDE REMARKS ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTRODUCTION OF THE AFRICAN UNION – EUROPEAN UNION RESEARCH AND INNOVATION MINISTERS MEETING SESSION ON INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ON THE TOPIC OF “HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS EMERGE STRONGER FROM COVID-19 CRISIS AND PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN THE ECONOMIC RECOVERY”

16 JULY 2020

Prof Sarah Agbor, African Union Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology;
Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Education, Culture and Youth;
Ministers of the African Union and the European Union responsible for research and innovation;
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you very much for this opportunity to introduce the discussion on cooperation between Africa and Europe to foster economic recovery through science and innovation.

We have already discussed this morning the central role played by science and technology in public health challenges posed by COVID-19, as well as in other great societal challenges of our time, like climate change.

No country has been spared the devastating negative impact of COVID-19 on our economies and societies. If indeed every cloud has its silver lining, let us make use of Covid 19 as an opportunity to place our economies on a higher trajectory of growth and development. We must not go back but go forward.

The responsibility is therefore incumbent on us, ministers responsible for research and innovation, to ensure that our innovation ecosystems are not only protected during these challenging times, but also provided with adequate resources, to play critical roles as engines for growth and development.

The challenge is not to go back to pre Covid 19 times, but to open new economic growth trajectories post Covid. Let me propose five themes in supporting this.

Firstly, we need to adopt a broader conceptualisation of innovation beyond R&D, as social innovation also has an equally important role to play. To this end, we need to adopt a whole-of-society approach to innovation, which must include, but go beyond,

our traditional research and technology organisations – but include civil society and grassroots organisations as actors and not only beneficiaries.

Secondly, we must use our very response to Covid 19 as a platform for industrialization especially in Africa. In South Africa, in a partnership between our Science Councils and the private automotive industry, we have already come up with South African produced ventilators. We are also seeking to position ourselves in the manufacturing and production of a Covid 19 vaccine once it is found, thus further building our pharmaceutical industry.

Thirdly, support for and collaboration with the business sector is crucial, including granting economic relief measures and incentives for enterprises and entrepreneurs, and launching ambitious public-private partnerships as with examples mentioned above. In South Africa we have decided to establish a sovereign national Innovation Fund to strengthen and grow our national system of innovation.

Fourthly, we need to address demographic, spatial and other imbalances, which hamper our ability to draw on the full potential of our innovation ecosystems, by providing dedicated support to women, youth, grassroots innovators and indigenous knowledge systems.

Fifthly and perhaps most importantly, governments need to be strategic enablers of innovation, by not only increasing funding for R&D but also taking measures such as using public procurement as vehicle for innovation.

I believe this could be a useful framework for our discussions.

Our two continents enjoy historic cooperation in research and education and now is the time to build on that foundation.

I have a few important suggestions for what could be components of an African-European innovation partnership:

We should continue to share of innovation policy ideas and experiences, whilst seeking to address constraints that for example inhibit reciprocal market access in Africa and Europe for our innovation-intensive enterprises.

We should also design new funding instruments for African-European cooperation in innovation, drawing on the resources of our development cooperation instruments and those of international financial institutions and most importantly continue to invest in people and support the international mobility and training of our innovators and entrepreneurs.

Dear colleagues, let me end by reminding ourselves of the words of our late President Nelson Mandela, as we approach the 2020 Mandela Day:

“IT ALWAYS SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE, UNTIL IT IS DONE”

Thank you