

EU-AFRICA: Tap development funds for research

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A senior South African diplomat has called on the European Union to consider the economic development created in Africa by research investments, when weighing overseas funding priorities.

The minister-counsellor for the South African embassy to the EU in Brussels, Daan du Toit, told a European Parliament hearing: "One of the key challenges is to tap not just basic research funds but also development funds and to use these for research infrastructure.

"If you want to invest in the future of Africa, invest in research."

An important tactic for African governments, he said was "leveraging development cooperation instruments for science and technology capacity-building", for instance through funding for research networking infrastructure.

Du Toit noted an increasing level of cooperation between public research programmes in Europe and Africa. He highlighted for instance, the 'Africa-EU partnership on science, information society and space', which has been promoting technical development in Africa.

The minister-counsellor also stressed that there had been increased success by African research teams in securing places within consortia receiving funding from the EU's seventh framework programme for research. And he praised the progress achieved in medical research by the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership.

He added: "These are very exciting times for science in Africa. Never before have we had such political backing for science and research, and there is a very strong focus on health."

Du Toit added that there were benefits for Europe and other developed regions too when creating such multilateral research infrastructures. Illustrating this, he recalled the lasting benefits created across Europe through investment into research centres and projects in the past 20 years in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

The diplomat was speaking at an event staged by the parliament's Scientific and Technology Options Assessment body, entitled a hearing on 'Health related Research Infrastructures and their contribution to their EU's grand challenges'.

Later, speaking to *University World News*, he explained further: "Many of the grand challenges confronting Europe, such as fighting disease, are also shared by Africa. They are global challenges and require global science-based responses.

"The investment in and development of health-related research infrastructures is part of this response, and is equally needed in Africa as in Europe. The growing portfolio of scientific collaboration between Africa and Europe should therefore also include a focus on research infrastructure," Du Toit said.

"There is rich potential for mutually beneficial cooperation. While African researchers can for example benefit from access to European facilities, African researchers have significant expertise to contribute to research efforts."

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