

HIS EXCELLENCY PAUL KAGAME, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF
RWANDA

ADDRESS TO THE 8th AFRICAN UNION SUMMIT

On

“Science, Technology and Research for Africa’s Development”

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
29 January 2007

- Your Excellency JOHN A. KUFFUOR, the Chairperson of the African Union;
- Your Excellency SASSOU NGUESSO, the outgoing Chairperson of the African Union
- Your Excellency MELES ZENAWI, Prime Minister of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, our gracious host;
- Excellencies Heads of State and Government;
- Alpha OMAR KONARE, President of the African Commission;
- AU Commissioner of Science and Technology;
- Director General of UNESCO;
- Professor Calestus Juma;
- Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honoured to address the imperative of science, technology and research for Africa's development at this 8th Summit of the African Union.

I thank you very much, your Excellency KONARE, for your kind invitation to address the 8th Summit on this important subject, and especially for elevating the importance of science and technology in Africa's development agenda.

Indeed, we commend the excellent manner in which the African Commission has organized this Summit and the associated events.

EXCELLENCIES

I begin my remarks with the premise that science, technology, and socioeconomic transformation are 'synonymous' terms.

Historically, whether one considers the role played by indigenous technologies in Africa, or the 19th century industrial revolution that transformed Europe and North America, or contemporary Asian experiences – it has been all about using scientific and technological applications to achieve fundamental socioeconomic transformation.

DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

We in Africa recognize this – and it is for this reason that African leaders have repeatedly called for the utilization of scientific and technological tools to accelerate our development efforts.

We realize that this is particularly true with ICTs that now link even the remotest rural villages to the rest of the world, as the use of mobile phones and associated services have demonstrated.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

This brings me back to my main message – discrepancy between intentions and concrete deeds.

We must be mindful that statements of intent do not remain just that – statements.

Maintaining the status quo is not an option for Africa – we only need to consider basic scientific and technological indicators on our continent to realize the state we are in.

One study has estimated that Africa has only 0.36 percent of the world total of scientists and engineers; another one indicates that our continent is responsible for only 0.8 percent of the world's scientific publications.

Our world share of patents is almost non-existent.

Parts of Africa, I am told, have only one scientist or engineer for about every ten thousand people.

A number of factors are responsible for this condition.

They include lack of support for research and development, brain drain, outdated curricula, impoverished science and technology facilities, absence of direct links between science and industry, and the declining knowledge infrastructure, especially the African university.

Worst of all, we in Africa at times seem trapped in consuming end-products of science and technology produced by others, as opposed to deploying this knowledge to build products or adding value to the existing ones.

EXCELLENCIES

The AU/NEPAD science and technology plan, together with the resolutions of the conferences of African science ministers provide us the foundation on which to launch our science, technology and research endeavours.

Hard questions still have to be raised, however.

For example, spending one percent of Gross Domestic Product on science, technology and research in our countries as recommended by African science ministers: is this not too little too late? Related to this question is also how this one percent of GDP is spent.

Clearly, it is not just about investment in science and technology, but also about improving the efficiency of this investment for greater impact in all aspects of national life.

It is about applying science and technology holistically – in all levels of education and training, in commercializing ideas, in developing business and quickening the pace of wealth-creation and employment-generation, in enabling government to provide better services, and indeed in providing basic tools to society at large for self- and collective betterment.

DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

Drawing on African and comparative experiences, we in Rwanda have been attempting to incorporate science and technology into the execution of our development vision.

We have, for example, begun to implement the resolution on spending one percent of Gross Domestic Product on science and technology.

In the current fiscal year, we are to spend 1.6 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, and plan to increase it to 3 percent in the next five years.

These resources are now supporting Rwanda's science and research institutions – including the teaching of science in primary and secondary schools, and sector-based centres of higher learning and research in agriculture, health, infrastructure, environment and biodiversity.

The year 2005 was a major milestone for us in that we began to implement our national policy on science, technology and innovation.

An important goal of this policy is to increase the number of science students in tertiary institutions – the target being seventy percent of the student population.

I hasten to add that these are but modest accomplishments that are being realized from a particularly low base of knowledge-creation and utilisation.

EXCELLENCIES

There is no doubt that in all regions of our continent, there exist islands of innovation with the potential to propel Africa into development.

With political will and resources, these regional dynamos can provide the momentum needed to accelerate Africa's transformation through science and technology.

Indeed, these nascent centres must become the basis of pooling our resources to build viable networks for larger economies of scale and, therefore, greater impact on the ground.

I wish in this respect to share an experience to illustrate what can be achieved if the building of regional centres and networks for science and technology can be approached in simple and practical fashion.

To begin with, earlier we were talking about football and the importance of sport.

In Rwanda, we have been sponsoring a regional football championship (CECAFA) – an exercise that costs us one hundred thousand United States dollars a year, to revive an otherwise dwindling sport in our region.

This is a lot of money in Rwandan terms – not a lot for others here - but the investment has been worthwhile.

The football championship has been rekindling regional youth spirit and competitiveness, not to mention nurturing future football stars in our sub-regional, and fostering regional spectator camaraderie.

Plans are underway to replicate this experiment – but this time with science and technology.

Building on the successes of the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology, we intend to create a scholarship fund for bright and capable youth from our region to study science and technology at this institute.

I am sure we will realize similar regional multiplier effects we experienced in the football competition.

The important point is, however, that together with our neighbours, we can mobilize more resources and engage in more ambitious regional innovations to elevate science and technology to a higher and more beneficial status.

In this context, we in Africa need to execute existing resolutions on regional knowledge centres and networks, including the recommendations from the G8 countries, which have essentially the same aims as ourselves – exploiting the power of science and technology. We thank our development partners and urge them to do more and NOT LESS in this regard.

DISTINGUISHED COLLEAGUES
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN;

Let me state, in conclusion, that African leaders and policymakers got it right in 1980 when they insisted that Africa needed to use science and technology as the basis for our continent's socioeconomic development, as a matter of utmost importance and urgency.

Twenty-seven years later, that statement still rings true.

Today, we still stand challenged to create that enabling environment in which science and technology play their rightful role in transforming lives.

Let us urgently marshal the necessary political will and courage to endow our continent with this vital knowledge, required to make Africa a better place.

I THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION