

NEWS

African science feels the pinch

Recession dampens donors' enthusiasm.

DURBAN

The global financial crisis is hampering plans to revive African science, researchers and policy-makers said last week in Durban, South Africa. Slashed donor funding, slowing foreign investment and competing budget priorities are the main culprits; hardest hit are the poorest countries and continent-wide projects.

"Our countries are in crisis, philanthropists are in crisis and the aid agencies are in crisis," Jean-Pierre Ezin, commissioner for science, technology and human resources for the African Union, said at a conference organized by TWAS, the academy of sciences for the developing world, based in Trieste, Italy.

In 2007, an African presidential summit on science saw funders falling over each other to offer assistance on science and technology programmes. Today the funding situation has changed dramatically.

The Swedish international development agency SIDA said last month that it would cut funding for its research cooperation programmes with developing countries by 20%, from an estimated 1.05 billion kronor (US\$150 million) to 800 million kronor. Britain's Wellcome Trust, which funds several medical research projects in Africa, cut overall grants for 2008–09 by £30 million (US\$50 million), to £590 million. Many people expect aid levels to fall this year as a result of the financial crunch, although the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development says effects are more likely to be felt in future years, as 2009 aid budgets were mostly finalized before the recession hit.

Not all the news is bad. Several American philanthropists, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said earlier this year that they would not cut research funding. The Gates Foundation even said that it would increase grants, despite a 20% drop in assets last year.

Still, Ezin says that the African Union won't be able to fulfil all its planned science activities for 2009 and 2010. Instead, his department will prioritize the Pan-African University, a network of existing African institutions that will train PhDs and carry out research, and a grant programme for African researchers. But a programme to train science teachers, he says, may have to be scaled back.

University researchers are also feeling the



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Broken hopes: research projects between African universities and other countries are being cut back.

pinch. In Senegal, a plan to expand the country's university system has come to a standstill. "The crisis came and everything stopped," says Lamine Ndiaye, a former vice-chancellor of the University of Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis, Senegal. Funding has dried up from the government and from France, the country's main development partner, he says.

Countries that don't depend on aid are also struggling. In Nigeria, the drop in demand for oil and gas, exacerbated by a stricken banking sector, means that private donations — a major source of funding for Nigerian universities — are slowing. "In the past, a conference like this would have a lot of Nigerians coming, supported by industry grants. We don't find many today," says Oye Ibidapo-Obe, president of the Nigerian Academy of Science in Lagos.

Nigeria's government won't pick up the slack left by the drop in private investments, Ibidapo-Obe adds. "Research is not seen as the major driver of the economy."

Even South Africa, the continent's economic powerhouse, is facing a lean year. The country's coffers have been depleted by its worst financial performance since the end of apartheid 15 years ago, says Naledi Pandor, the science minister.

Pandor says she has been assured by the country's treasury that her department won't face cuts in the mid-term budget, due for release as *Nature* went to press. But the dip in the country's growth rate means that the department, which was given 4.2 billion rand (US\$560 million) for 2009–10, may have to put some planned projects on the back burner. Probable cuts include a 700-million-rand semi-commercial titanium test facility, which could be either delayed or dropped completely.

Recent progress in building up African science could be lost, warns Mohammed Hassan, executive director of TWAS. In the 1980s, African governments responded to a steep economic decline by cutting their higher-education budgets, he notes, and Africa went from having some of the best universities in the developing world to some of the worst.

Although the world economy is starting to recover, the worst may be yet to come for Africa, says John Muyonga, a food scientist at the University of Makerere in Uganda. His institution depends "close to 100%" on donor funding, he says. Most of his colleagues have grants that cover several years, and may struggle to find new funding when these grants run out. "We may have more impact in 2010 than in 2009," he adds.

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