

AFRICAN SCIENCE

Zimbabwe's science crisis

Researchers fight to preserve national academy.

BY SARAH WILD

Researchers from Zimbabwe met in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 14 September to explore ways to support the Zimbabwe Academy of Science (ZAS), which is in dire straits.

The academy has historically survived on donations and membership fees, but this is no longer sustainable, said ZAS head Christopher Mutambirwa. According to Mutambirwa, a former environmental scientist at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, the academy has fewer than 100 fellows, and the country's economic distress means that fewer than 15 members now even pay their fees.

Traditionally, much of the country's research has come from ties between universities and the agriculture industry. The economy took a negative turn after 2000, when the government of President Robert Mugabe — who has been in power since 1987 and is now 92 — fast-tracked

a programme of land expropriations, and agricultural productivity plummeted. The country has also been subject to international sanctions since 2002.

The resulting long-term decline in the economy has caused millions to leave Zimbabwe. Many have crossed the border into neighbouring South Africa, including some scientists. "Without enough money around, it's made a number of people leave," says Christopher Chetsanga, a biochemist who heads the country's Council for Higher Education and was president of the ZAS at its founding in 2004.

There are no official figures on the flight of skilled Zimbabweans; according to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization report, a government survey found that about 1,300 researchers were there in 2012. Still, Zimbabwe has consistently produced between 300 and 400 peer-reviewed papers a year, and the ZAS is one of the few institutions in the country that have continued to advocate for

science. Both Chetsanga and Mutambirwa said that the ZAS had pleaded with the government to recognize the academy and fund it through an act of parliament. But the current economic crisis means that is unlikely.

Among the most drastic solutions proposed for the ZAS were to move its headquarters to Pretoria in South Africa, or to make the academy a 'virtual' entity. But University of Zimbabwe sociologist Rudo Gaidzanwa says such measures could be counterproductive. "Until our situation improves economically, we're going to haemorrhage academics," she says. ■

CORRECTION

The News Feature 'Chemistry on the fast track' (*Nature* **537**, 156–158; 2016) implied that birth defects were definitely caused by one chiral configuration of thalidomide, but the actual mechanism remains unclear.