Nigeria's new leadership raises hopes for science

Oye Ibidapo-Obe, former head of the Nigerian Academy of Science, discusses research-policy priorities for the country's new president, Muhammadu Buhari.

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On 29 May, Muhammadu Buhari assumed office as the President of Nigeria after ousting the incumbent, Goodluck Jonathan, in a 28 March election. Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and largest economy. Although it produces more scientific papers than any other sub-Saharan nation except South Africa, it publishes much fewer than many other African countries relative to the size of its economy, and its publication output has fallen since 2011 (see 'Paper plunge').

Courtesy of Oye Ibidapo-Obe

Oye Ibidapo-Obe says "individual Nigerians continue to excel internationally in science and technology".

Oye Ibidapo-Obe, vice-chancellor of the Federal University Ndufu-Alike Ikwo in Ebonyi State and former president of the Nigerian Academy of Science, tells *Nature* about the previous government's impact on research. He also lays out his hopes for Nigerian science under the new administration.

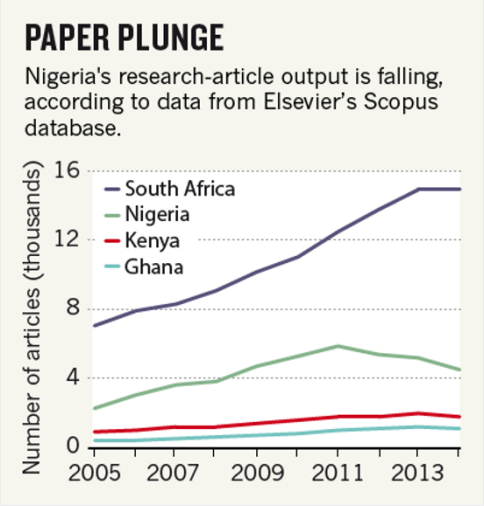
Do you expect the new leadership to be a positive force for science in Nigeria?

The incoming government did not mention science research and funding in its campaign, probably because the average Nigerian does not see science as the core need of the country, so it was not a vote-winner. Muhammadu Buhari said in his acceptance speech that he would regard every Nigerian equally and make room for ideas that would move Nigeria forward. I strongly believe the government will listen to academics when suggestions are presented to it.

How has Nigerian science fared under Goodluck Jonathan's government?

Overall, our country has suffered from leadership that paid only lip service to the contribution of science to national development. The decline in research output is a worrying sign. Goodluck Jonathan — who has a PhD in zoology — did give a US$5-million research grant to the Nigerian Academy of Science (NAS), and in 2011 he introduced the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund), which distributes public funding for infrastructure in Nigeria's universities, and for research through competitive grants. We do have strong points: food science and agricultural research.

But the administration failed painfully by not implementing a national science and innovation policy it introduced in 2012, which was supposed to increase the government's spending on research and development from 0.22% of GDP [gross domestic product] to 1% of GDP. In 2012, Jonathan announced a fund that was supposed to be Nigeria's equivalent of the US National Science Foundation (NSF) and was to raise the country's science spending, but that never took off.



Why didn't that policy make it through?

I think the science ministry under Jonathan's administration was not run by experts who know what the nation's science priorities should be. In my opinion, ministers are appointed who don't have the requisite experience. One of the reasons for the poor manifestation of Nigerian science policy is that the science community does not have sufficiently close ties with the government. In 2009, when I was president of the NAS, I pushed for a bill to make the academy science advisers to the federal government, but it wasn't passed. I was disappointed about that and I hope that the new administration will take it up.

How has Nigeria's research fared over the past few decades?

Before the 1980s, science and science education in Nigeria was developing on a par with similar developing countries. We had good schools and pioneering universities. But then a decline set in: the availability of oil money shifted the political emphasis to

quick returns on investment. Employment, infrastructure and education spending dropped.

Nigeria is now lagging on the World Bank's knowledge economy index, but it is near the top of indexes of corruption and political instability. Yet individual Nigerians continue to excel internationally in science and technology. The TETFund has built several functional laboratories in universities and research centres. I think that if the current strides are continued, Nigerian research will yet surpass its former glory.

What should the new government do to strengthen the country's research?
I will recommend that the 2012 science policy be properly implemented — meaning that funding is raised and an NSF-like body is introduced — and that the government cut out the bureaucratic bottleneck at the ministry of science.

I would like to see a country that is aware of the value of science. Our leaders know and profess that science can provide solutions to our contemporary challenges — poverty, education, good health provision, human security, clean and adequate energy, proper public infrastructure, food, climate-change adaptation, democracy and good governance. But they have not shown sufficient courage to invest massively in science and technology.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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