

Africa pursues goal of scientific unity

ADDIS ABABA

African heads of state and ministers ended their summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 30 January amid a blaze of initiatives on education, science and sustainable development — once they had stopped talking about football.

Decisions made at the three-day summit of the 53-member African Union (AU) include plans for three new funding agencies, an Africa-wide system of intellectual-property protection, and a 20-year strategy for biotechnology. Africa's leaders also asked the AU secretariat to produce an assessment of alternative energy sources in the continent, particularly biofuels, before their next meeting in July.

The meeting was driven by the AU's science team, headed by Nagia Essayed, and the head of her secretariat, Botlhale Tema. By lunchtime on the first day, both women were looking dejected. The themes of science and the environment had been overshadowed by the glitzy launch that morning of the International Year of African Football. Television coverage of the summit, moreover, focused on political conflicts between member states and disagreements over the election of the AU's chair.

During lunch, Essayed sat with several science ministers and their advisers to discuss how to steer the presidents back to the summit's main business. Calestous Juma, co-chair of the AU's biotechnology advisory panel, had a light-hearted suggestion to link science and football: "Countries that export soccer balls need to have expertise in precision engineering."

But the breakthrough happened the following morning when Nicholas Stern, economic adviser to the UK government and author of an influential report on climate change, gave a speech on the causes and effects of climate change. This provoked an angry response from several presidents, including Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, who saw it as a hypocritical lecture on how to be clean from a representative of one of the world's major polluting countries. Museveni said he regarded global warming as an act of aggression by developed countries against Africa.

But Stern's stark message made clear how much African countries stand to suffer from global warming. Essayed says that afterwards it was easier to convince heads of state that Africa urgently needs stronger scientific capacity — not least to help the continent adapt to rising temperatures. "I felt that we got more support

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UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon addresses the 8th African Union summit in Addis Ababa.

for science after what happened during the climate-change debate," she says.

The most ambitious commitment came from Paul Kagame, president of Rwanda. In his keynote speech, Kagame pledged to double his country's spending on research and development to 3% of its national income — the average for developed nations — within five years.

The heads of state gave the go-ahead to the Green Wall for the Sahara, a ten-year plan to green the Sahara/Sahel region. And they agreed that work should begin on a 20-year biotechnology strategy. They hope to reconcile scientists, environmentalists, industry and church groups, who have been arguing over genetically modified crops, and find a common approach. The decision may disappoint Germany's scientific and technical aid agency GTZ, which is funding a separate Africa-wide project to develop some tough regulations on biotechnology.

The three funding agencies to be set up are an education fund, an environment fund based on the successful United Nations Global Environment Facility, and a petroleum fund that will enable oil-rich countries to provide a financial cushion for poorer nations when oil prices are high.

The reforms to intellectual property protection are centred on creating a pan-African

organization to replace the two existing organizations that do this job — one for the 16 English-speaking countries, and one for the 16 French-speaking ones. The new body, vigorously lobbied for by the Geneva-based World Intellectual Property Organization, will also provide Africa-wide intellectual-property protection for north Africa's Arabic-speaking countries. The AU secretariat has until July to come up with a progress report.

Initiatives that failed to get the nod include a council of presidents to monitor the implementation of the AU's scientific commitments. This was rejected on the advice of science ministers who felt that this was their job, for which they have recently set up the African Ministerial Council on Science and Technology.

A second initiative that failed, for now, was an Africa-wide science and innovation fund. This fund may yet happen, according to Essayed. Heads of state asked for modifications, and the plan will be presented again at a future AU summit. "I am going to nag them until we get this one through," she says.

Beyond science and technology policy, the heads of state also moved ahead with plans for an African parliament, a central bank, a monetary fund and a court of human rights. These are in line with the AU's desire for complete political and economic integration, leading to what it calls a United States of Africa. ■

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