

AFRICA DAY 2024: UNIVERSITIES' ROLE IN THE AU-EU INNOVATION AGENDA

Hester Klopper*

Observed annually on 25 May, [Africa Day](#) is not merely a date on our calendar – it is a symbol of our shared history, collective struggles, and boundless potential as Africans. It is a day to celebrate our different languages, music, art, and traditions – the threads that weave together the vibrant tapestry of African identity.

Africa Day is about reaffirming our commitment to the principles of Pan-Africanism, which encompass the prosperity, solidarity and unity of our continent, and cooperation amongst African nations. It is also about recognising that our destinies are connected and that we can only address the challenges that we face as a continent by working together.

But perhaps most importantly, Africa Day is a call to action. It is a reminder that the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality is far from over. It is a challenge to every one of us to rededicate ourselves to the task of building a better Africa – an Africa where every child has access to education, where every woman is empowered to reach her full potential, and where every person can live in dignity and peace. To build a better Africa, we will have to find innovative solutions to some of the most pressing challenges facing the continent, including but not limited to education, health, climate change, governance, and sustainable development.

Innovation Agenda

One initiative that could be helpful in this regard is the [African Union \(AU\) and the European Union \(EU\) Innovation Agenda](#). The AU-EU Innovation Agenda offers a transformative framework for collaboration between the EU and the AU to increase the innovative capacities and achievements of European and African researchers and innovators into tangible outputs, including products, services, jobs, and businesses. As Margrethe Vestager, Executive Vice-President for a Europe Fit for the Digital Age [stated](#): “[t]he Innovation Agenda will represent the backbone of our cooperation supporting research and innovation actions with Africa. It aims to create [a] tangible positive impact on the ground, such as tools for agricultural use, climate services, and food systems transformation. Alongside cutting-edge medicines, biotechnologies and diagnostics”.

Furthermore, research and innovation should be translated into tangible products, services, enterprises, and employment opportunities, thus establishing a sustainable long-term cooperation model between the AU and EU, and creating a prosperous future for millions of Africans. The four priority areas of the Innovation Agenda namely public health, green transitions, innovation and technology, and increased capacity for science, are of immense importance in the sustainable development of the African continent.

Role of universities

According to the [Innovation Agenda](#), the development of “sustainable, long-lasting and mutually beneficial higher education, research and innovation partnerships between the AU and the EU countries [is] seen as the foundation for resilient knowledge economies and societies, preventing or mitigating, among others, the effects of major crises”. Munyaradzi Makoni [argues](#) that the Innovation Agenda places universities in a central role in the development of AU-EU relations. Considering this, the Innovation Agenda received support from the [African Research Universities Alliance](#) (ARUA), a network of 19 of the continent’s leading universities, and the [Guild of European Research-Intensive Universities](#) (the Guild), which has 21 members, Stellenbosch University being one of them. ARUA and The Guild expressed that they share the concerns of the Innovation Agenda

that there is a need to address the brain-drain of young, skilled African researchers and create opportunities for these African researchers to apply their skills and expertise within the African continent.

Furthermore, ARUA and The Guild welcomed the proposals in the Innovation, particularly the following:

- “The development and strengthening of Clusters of Excellence, which can strengthen South-South as well as North-South science collaboration, and foster research excellence by supporting highly talented young researchers, as well as more senior researchers through the establishment of “advanced study institutes;
- “The strengthening of inclusive and accessible world-class research and innovation infrastructures in the EU and AU;
- The promotion of joint African-European Master and Doctoral degree programmes.”

In light of these ambitions of the AU and EU to improve the role and importance of research, higher education, and innovation in the Innovation Agenda as part of their overall collaboration agreement, ARUA and The Guild launched [17 joint Clusters of Research Excellence](#) (CoREs), and now expanded to 20 CoREs. . The CoREs hold promise for significantly contributing to achieving the ambitious objectives outlined in the new AU-EU collaboration agreement, which include “a strong, inclusive, green and digital recovery and transformation”, focusing on sustainable investments in key areas from infrastructure and health to education and the environment.

By collaborating to address shared societal issues, the prominent universities in Africa and Europe involved in the CoRE initiative aim to transform the landscape of collaborative research, emphasising equity as a prerequisite for outstanding and impactful research. Each cluster of the initiative tackles a significant societal challenge outlined in the AU-EU Innovation Agenda.

The Innovation Agenda underscores Africa’s critical role in advancing innovation and sustainable development and emphasises the collaboration between the EU and AU to address common challenges and explore opportunities for benefit that is mutual. Considering this, Africa plays a multi-faceted role in the global community. Firstly, the continent boasts an abundance of natural resources, including minerals that are essential for renewable energy and sustainable technology. Secondly, its potential for innovation and entrepreneurship makes it a key player in advancing the green transition economy and achieving the [Sustainable Development Goals](#). Thirdly, Africa has the potential to influence policy and international agreements on global issues of climate change, sustainable development, and inclusive growth.

As we mark Africa Day, let us recommit ourselves to utilise this potential to build a better continent through innovation. Let us stand in solidarity with everyone across the continent, as we strive together towards a brighter future for all Africans. Let us never forget the words of Nelson Mandela, who reminded us that "it is in your hands to create a better world for all who live in it."

***Prof Hester Klopper is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Strategy, Global and Corporate Affairs at Stellenbosch University.**