

Germany, South Africa work together in science

The German-South African Year of Science is halfway through. The initiative, which runs from April 2012 to April 2013, is aimed at strengthening cooperation between the two countries in the areas of science, technology, innovation and research.



This is the first time South Africa has partnered with Germany in the European country's ongoing series of scientific cooperation years with what it calls "strategically important partner countries". Previous partners include Egypt (2007/2008), Israel (2008/2009), China (2009/2010), Brazil (2010/2011) and Russia (2011/2012).

The initiative arose out of the science and technology agreement signed between South Africa and Germany in 1996, which has seen the establishment of a joint fund that promotes research projects in areas that affect all people on the planet, including life, health, earth and agricultural sciences.

The year of science was launched by former science and technology minister Naledi Pandor and her counterpart Dr Annette Schavan, the German minister of education and research, under the theme Enhancing Science Partnerships for Innovation and Sustainable Development.

"We are proud of our technological heritage, and we've made a disproportionate contribution to technological innovation worldwide, considering our relatively small economy," said Pandor at the launch.

"There are areas in which we are global leaders - for example, our Council for Scientific and Industrial Research in partnership with the Boeing Company inaugurated the world's first Ka-band telemetry, tracking and command facility at the local Satellite Applications Centre at Hartebeesthoek. And the Council for Science and Industrial Research is working with Airbus on using titanium and other advanced materials in aircraft."

"The aim of this year is to pool our scientific capacity and strengthen existing research partnerships in Germany and South Africa," said Schavan.

The two also planned to promote the sciences as an attractive career option for young people.

Pandor's successor Derek Hanekom is continuing the cooperation she helped to initiate.

Mutual benefit

The two countries have much to offer each other. Germany is known for its expertise in the fields of technology and applied sciences while South Africa is a valuable research location for issues such as water, biodiversity and climate.

According to the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the objectives of the year-long initiative are:

- To emphasise the diversity and excellence of the German-South African initiatives and projects in the fields of research and technology for the purpose of promoting the two countries as centres of innovation,
- To establish a new quality of bilateral cooperation, for example by setting up new partnerships between German and South African research institutions, universities, colleges and companies, as well as intensified collaborative arrangements between ministries and intermediary and support organisations,
- To intensify the exchange of views, insights and information between young scientists in the two countries.

To achieve this, a number of themes of particular importance to the bilateral cooperation have been identified. They are astronomy; climate change; bioeconomy; human capital development; health innovation; social sciences and humanities; and urbanisation and megacities.

The year also covers some of the DST's existing activities, such as the annual Women in Science Awards, which acknowledge South Africa's top female minds in various relevant fields.

Bilateral cooperation

The science year's organising committee called for applications from the respective science communities, which could become focus projects throughout its duration. Of the more than 200 that were received, 41 were selected and have received financial assistance as well.

An extensive calendar of events is also available for interested parties. Events to date have included a democracy workshop and one on ICT-based rural healthcare, both at Stellenbosch University; the Berlin 10 open access conference; a forum on the management of invasive plant species in Berlin; and the Miriam Makeba Memory Festival, also in Berlin.

There are still five months' worth of exciting activities. Upcoming events include a workshop on structural biology, and the 50th annual conference of the Microscopy Society of Southern Africa, both taking place in Cape Town in December.

"We hope that this joint effort will provide impetus for pioneering projects and future innovation," said Pandor.

The year-long initiative is supported by numerous organisations and companies in both countries, including the Academy of Science of South Africa, Germany's Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Human Sciences Research Council, the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, and the Volkswagen Foundation.