

President Cyril Ramaphosa: Inaugural National Covid-19 Conference

31 Jul 2020

Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande,
Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize,
Director-General of the World Health Organisation, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus,
African Union Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology, Professor Sarah Anyang Agbor,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to address this conference on harnessing science, technology and innovation to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has been just over six months since the first case of coronavirus was reported and the death toll continues to climb across the world.

A number of countries, including South Africa, are experiencing significant surges in new infections.

At the same time, we have stepped up collaboration and solidarity.

In the global race for solutions, we are pushing the frontiers of scientific research and health innovation.

This is not limited to product and technology development.

It also extends to the development and improvement of policies, systems, services and delivery methods.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, for his support and endorsement of this conference.

The WHO has a longstanding commitment to pursuing health innovation for the benefit of all.

I also wish to thank Commissioner Sarah Anyang Agbor for her leadership.

The work of the African Union Commission in response to COVID-19 has been impressive, especially its support for the African Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

South Africa continues to benefit from various international partnerships in the fight against COVID-19, including the BRICS alliance, the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, and the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership.

In May this year, South Africa, as chair of the African Union, participated in the EU Commission's global coronavirus pledging event.

We made a commitment to co-invest in the development of diagnostics and therapeutics and in the search for a COVID-19 vaccine.

We are currently in the process of finalising a R25 million investment to boost pan-African vaccine manufacturing capabilities through the African Renaissance Fund.

This pandemic has put countries to the test and severely challenged the capabilities of our healthcare systems.

As the international community we have been unanimous that services, supplies, products and technologies for prevention, treatment and care of COVID-19 must be available to all. No country must be left behind.

Resource constraints pose a very real barrier to the ability of vulnerable countries to effectively manage the pandemic.

And it is here that scientific innovation will play an increasingly prominent role.

Science, technology and innovation has proven to be an important tool for generating valuable insights and for the delivery of effective solutions.

A platform such as this one enables scientists, governments, business and civil society to engage in open discussion, to share experiences and best practice, and to chart the way ahead.

We know that every strategy to manage COVID-19 must focus on behavioural change, and that social distancing and proper hygiene are our safest and best bets at this time.

By equal measure we must continue to work tirelessly to develop technological solutions that meet our most pressing challenge, and that is resource scarcity.

One looks for instance at the advances in ventilator development and production in developing countries.

Soon we will witness the very first ventilators produced by the South African National Ventilator Project coming off the assembly line at a factory in Cape Town.

These locally-produced ventilators will complement existing stock in the public and private health system and those purchased from or donated by other countries.

A number of South African innovators have taken up the challenge of addressing the need for COVID-19 solutions – bulk-producing hand sanitisers, developing self-screening assessment tools in local languages and pioneering contact tracing applications.

This pandemic must be a clarion call for African nations to invest in what is already a vibrant pan-African science and innovation ecosystem.

Investment in research and innovation has enabled South Africa to respond effectively to the pandemic.

We have been able to support the national COVID-19 response in critical areas, including the development and provision of diagnostic tools, ventilators and personal protective equipment, and in epidemiological modelling and data analytics.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, we have been able to harness innovations like telemedicine to protect patients and healthcare workers from exposure.

The introduction of COVID Connect has enabled over 6 million citizens and healthcare workers to access information on the pandemic through mobile messaging platforms.

South African researchers are working in collaboration with international vaccine developers around a potential COVID-19 vaccine.

The South African Medical Research Council and the Department of Science and Innovation have provided R10 million funding for the first South African COVID-19 vaccine trial.

Our researchers and scientists have the expertise to develop human vaccines, having been involved in the development of several other vaccines.

But it isn't just in the research space that we have demonstrated capability.

We also have important laboratory infrastructure.

The National Health Laboratory Service has contracted with a number of universities and government-funded platforms to assist with additional capacity to conduct COVID-19 testing.

We have also developed a pathway for the potential production of COVID-19 vaccines locally.

South Africa is part of a traditional medicine panel set up in partnership with the WHO to assist in developing protocols for various aspects of traditional medicine usage.

The Medical Research Council has also brought together a number of government, academic and industry partners to support the development and local production of diagnostic kits and reagents for COVID-19.

Harnessing the potential of science, technology and innovation for vaccine and other manufacturing is not just about security of supply.

It is also about boosting local capabilities, supporting local industries and creating jobs.

Strategic partnerships in science, technology and innovation will play an important role in our economic recovery.

As we strive to rebuild and repurpose our economies we will need to explore opportunities in sectors such as low-carbon energy, the circular and green economies, smart manufacturing and Big Data.

There is immense potential for kick-starting economic growth in the uptake of innovation and in driving technological solutions for the delivery of services.

It is crucial that we maintain the momentum of international cooperation and solidarity to ensure inclusivity not just in the provision of life-saving therapeutics for COVID-19 but also in sustainable economic recovery.

Science, technology and innovation are key to healthier populations, productivity and progress.

It is of the utmost importance that they remain a public good.

As we collectively strive to overcome this pandemic, we must share experience and expertise.

We must pool resources through joint investments, data sharing and reciprocal access to research infrastructure.

We must reinforce global solidarity through science diplomacy.

This Conference provides a valuable platform to advance these efforts and to affirm the absolute necessity of health innovation as a vital resource for the common good.

I wish you well with your deliberations.

I thank you

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