

# African moon bid seeks boost for spacecraft blast off

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The Africa2Moon Mission has drawn just \$13,000 (11,000 euros) of the initial target of \$150,000 with a countdown of only three weeks left before the appeal closes.

In contrast, a private British moon project—Lunar Mission One—rode the Internet crowdfunding phenomenon to reach its target of nearly a million dollars ahead of deadline last month.

The apparent lack of interest may come as little surprise to those for whom Africa conjures up disease and poverty rather than science and [space exploration](#).

But countering that view of the continent is one of the underlying aims of the project by the Foundation for Space Development, which says it will go ahead even if the initial target is not reached.

"We get a lot of Afro-pessimism," CEO Jonathan Weltman told AFP. "Anything positive, aspirational or leading edge is treated with scepticism.

"But I have faith that Africa can do this, without a doubt."

The non-profit group was co-founded in 2009 by the head of the space lab at the University of Cape Town, Peter Martinez, who is also chairman of the South African Council for Space Affairs, the national regulatory body.

## **A positive response**

The mission is to see an African-engineered rocket take an African-built module to the moon.

The aim is to inspire wider interest in the study of science and

technology among young Africans while stemming the "brain-drain" of highly qualified graduates to the developed world.

The world's poorest continent recently scored a major international scientific coup with the decision in 2012 to build the bulk of the world's biggest telescope in South Africa.

The multi-nation Square Kilometre Array Radio telescope (SKA) will investigate the Big Bang, peek at black holes and uncover new frontiers—possibly even life beyond Earth—by peering further into the universe than ever before.

SKA site bid manager Adrian Tiplady said the telescope project proved "there's definitely the skills and talent out there and a huge amount of interest as well".

The Africa2Moon project "certainly is feasible," he told AFP. "There is the expertise to design, develop and launch such a vehicle."

South Africa is the most developed economy on the continent and under the former apartheid regime had nuclear weapons and a ballistic missile programme, but the foundation is pushing for an all-inclusive African effort.

The appeal for \$150,000 is to cover the first phase, which aims to finalise a feasibility report by the end of November and present it to an international conference.

Only then will it be possible to estimate the full cost of the mission, Weltman said.

## **Afro-pessimism**

He admits to disappointment—and some puzzlement—over the failure so far of the hoped-for crowdfunding boost for Africa's rocket to the moon.

"The industry and media response has been overwhelmingly positive and supportive," Weltman said.

"The donor response has been slower than we hoped but has picked up dramatically at the start of this year and we are optimistic about our target being reached, if not by the end of the current crowdfunding campaign, then through other funding sources in the first quarter of the year."

Apart from Afro-pessimism, a lack of publicity on the project—whose website is [africa2moon.developspacesa.org/](http://africa2moon.developspacesa.org/)—may have contributed to the funding shortfall.

Some critics have also suggested that the sort of money spent on space exploration could be put to better use on other projects in Africa, such as conquering Ebola and other diseases.

But the planners argue that investment in education is the best way to take the continent forward.

Weltman says the African project is aiming for the moon rather than any other space venture partly because any African child will be able to step outside, look up and share the pride in a successful mission.

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