

# African scientists say more needed to keep brightest at home

March 11 2016, by Jennifer O'mahony

---



Senegal President Macky Sall (L) delivers a speech in Dakar during the opening of the "Next Einstein Forum" (NEF) on March 8, 2016

Is Africa ready to take on the war against malaria, HIV, Ebola and the like? Not yet, said some of the continent's brightest scientific minds at a landmark gathering this week in Senegal.

Researchers at the cutting edge of international vaccine and public health

research told AFP at the first gathering of the ambitious "Next Einstein Forum" for Africa that their academic success stories remained exceptional—though the landscape is changing.

"If I'd remained in Cameroon I'd never have got where I am, so at a relatively early stage I identified what I really wanted to do and I had to leave the country," said Wilfred Ndifon, whose mathematical approach to designing vaccines has brought him international acclaim.

Ndifon's skill with numbers and determination to eradicate disease that afflicted those around him as a child, led him to a scholarship abroad and a PhD from Princeton after he realised he could reach more people through science than as a medical doctor.

His work on a general principle for inoculation is now being used to develop a comprehensive malaria vaccine, but he says young Africans who want to take a similar path would still likely require time abroad to develop their skillset.

"The kind of education I got... a lot of it was informal, with a lot of like-minded people doing curiosity-driven research," he said. Attracting the brightest minds and giving them the space to think would require a sea change in African universities, he added.



Wilfrid Ndifon's work on a general principle for inoculation is now being used to develop a comprehensive malaria vaccine

Higher education participation in sub-Saharan Africa remains the lowest in the world, meaning the pipeline of scientists and technology professionals remains tiny in terms of the region's needs.

Although private universities are booming, government investment remains well under one percent of GDP across sub-Saharan Africa, compared with rates of around 1.0-3.5 percent in Western Europe and the United States.

Researchers said countries experiencing stronger comparative economic growth such as Rwanda, Nigeria and Ethiopia had a duty to start investing in this area.

Commitments to science would help countries become "capable of solving their own problems," said Mohlopheni Jackson Marakalala, just back from four years of research at Harvard's School of Public Health.

The University of Cape Town lecturer attended the forum before embarking on a major research project into tuberculosis, which still kills 1.5 million people annually.

Marakalala's university experience in South Africa, home to sub-Saharan Africa's most respected institutions, was marked by gaps in funding and technology he feels must be addressed if the continent is to compete on the world stage.

In the west "you start with good money, the right equipment," he said.

Citation: African scientists say more needed to keep brightest at home (2016, March 11) retrieved 10 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-03-african-scientists-brightest-home.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.