

ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, PROF  
BLADE NZIMANDE ON THE OCCASION OF THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE SCIENCE  
FORUM SOUTH AFRICA 2023 HELD AT THE CSIR INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION  
CENTRE

Pretoria, 6 December 2023

Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, participants in the Science  
Forum South Africa 2023

In South Africa we have a popular expression, often used at the start of an address, to  
say that all protocols are observed.

In using this expression, the objective is to acknowledge everyone, including those who  
may feel offended if they are not individually recognised by the speaker. This afternoon, I  
also want to say all protocols are observed, but for a slightly different reason.

The Science Forum South Africa is an event where all is welcome, and the contributions  
of all are encouraged and appreciated, as the debate on the role science should play in  
society, is indeed a debate in which everyone should participate.

When I therefore say that all protocols are observed, it is an affirmation that you are all  
welcome, and that your contributions are not only invited, but strongly encouraged.

Our Forum is not an event for passive consumption but for activist contributions –  
because what we need is for all of you to become militants for science.

This is the eighth organisation of the Science Forum South Africa, and the first, which is a  
fully-fledged in person event since 2019, after the hybrid events organised during the  
COVID-19 pandemic.

Of course, in 2022, we had a pleasant interruption when the Science Forum South Africa  
made way for South Africa's highly successful hosting of the World Science Forum in  
Cape Town, last December.

However today we are back in the City of Tshwane, at the CSIR International Convention  
Centre, close to the heartbeat of South Africa's National System Innovation, gathered  
with the same objective as before, and that is to ignite conversations about science.

Since 2015, we have always had three key objectives, which informed the organisation of  
the Science Forum, and these remain valid today.

Firstly, through the organisation of a series of debates on the topical science policy  
challenges of the day, our goal is to enable shared policy learning for all participants,  
including by providing a platform for civil society to contribute.

Secondly, and notably through the organisation of the Science Forum exhibition, our aim is to promote the excellence and capabilities of South African science and innovation, to international but also new domestic partners.

Our third objective is arguably the most important one and that is to develop partnerships, by rekindling old, cementing current and exploring new relationships.

The success of this Forum will, thus, be measured not only by the quality of the debates and the exhibition, but also by the vibrancy of the networking outside the formal programme.

It is, thus, my hope that, dare I say, the “buzz” and the “vibe” of Science Forum South Africa 2023 will leave you all excited and motivated to work together, to put science at work, at work for our society, and at work for social justice.

The theme for the 2023 Forum is People, Priorities and Partnerships for the Decadal Plan.

In case you are wondering what the Decadal Plan is, let me say, you have come to the right place. Because South Africa’s Decadal or ten-year plan for science, technology, and innovation, adopted by our Cabinet at the end of 2022 is also your plan.

It is a plan for all who have the interests of South Africa at heart, and a plan for all, inside and outside government, who can contribute through science, technology, and innovation, to improve the quality of living of all South Africans.

The Decadal Plan has a dual focus. In the first instance its aim is to ensure South Africa’s investment in science, technology and innovation delivers more decisive impacts in advancing socio-economic development in South Africa responding to poverty, inequality, and unemployment.

Secondly, and equally important, the Plan’s objective is to look after the well-being of the South African science and innovation system, ensuring it continues to grow as well as being transformed to be more responsive to the needs of South Africa.

The Decadal Plan’s success will depend on partnerships, our ability to work together, within government, between different departments and Ministries.

We also need to work better together within science across the artificial boundaries imposed by the narrow definition of disciplines. And we also need a compact, reinforced collaboration between government, the private sector, the scientific and academic communities, and civil society at large.

I am proud to announce that in order to bring all these partners together, for a strategic discussion focused on the implementation of the Decadal Plan, South Africa’s President,

His Excellency, President Cyril Ramaphosa, will be convening the first Presidential Plenary Meeting on Science, Technology and Innovation at this very venue, next Tuesday 12 December 2023.

The Presidential Plenary Meeting is a governance mechanism introduced by the Decadal Plan to bring senior South African leaders of all sectors together for a focused discussion on the role of science in South African society, including the need for increased investment.

Our Science Forum of course has a similar agenda and can, thus, be considered as a preparatory conference for the Presidential Plenary.

People, priorities and partnerships, the theme of the Science Forum, is the "PPP," which is crucial for the success of the Decadal Plan.

I am, thus, delighted that, with a rich and diverse programme, with more than sixty individual sessions, the Science Forum South Africa 2023, will provide ample opportunity for us to consider how best to harness people, priorities and partnerships, for the implementation of the Decadal Plan.

I very much look forward to these discussions and I would like to assure you that the salient messages emanating from the Forum will be reported to President Ramaphosa next week.

The Decadal Plan's success will of course depend on the People tasked with its implementation, in other words, all of us.

The various debates organised as part of Building Human Capabilities in Science, Technology and Innovation track of the Forum accordingly merits our priority attention.

The topics of Forum debates such as promoting diverse career pathways for doctoral and post-doctoral researchers, or the promotion of human-centric competency development in an age of disruptive technology development, number among those themes, which speak directly to the focus of the Decadal Plan and indeed the Presidential Plenary.

Our Decadal Plan, which I again would like to emphasize is also yours, does not identify as priorities specific scientific disciplines or technology platforms.

The focus is rather on how we harness science holistically, including the social sciences and humanities, to respond to our key societal challenges.

The forum agenda is thus strategically compiled with debates focused on these priorities or challenges including the interrogation of the future of society as shaped by for example the impact of technological disruption on democracy.

Other important tracks will debate the role of innovation in shaping the industry of tomorrow; and the role of science in enabling sustainable, inclusive development.

The Decadal Plan, thus, requires People to focus on Priorities working together in Partnership. With tracks of the Forum programme focused on themes such as economic and science diplomacy, as well as the advancement of the Pan-African science agenda, I am delighted that international cooperation features prominently on the Forum agenda.

In this regard, I am convinced that our plenary debate later this afternoon, on the role of the African Diaspora in the African science agenda will be a highlight.

But it is not only international partnerships which are required but also a national consensus within South Africa on the importance of science and innovation for our society.

Achieving this crucial objective will significantly benefit from the Forum's sessions on science communication and science journalism. We have a good message to communicate, and we need to become better at communicating it.

Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted that the Science Forum South African 2023, have brought you all together with such a rich programme, with the purpose and focus for science to make a difference.

I would like to thank all who have contributed to the Forum's organisation, with a special word of thanks to Dr Phil Mjwara, Director-General of the Department of Science and Innovation, and Dr Thulani Dlamini, CEO of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, the CSIR, whose teams working together as part of the Science Diplomacy Capital for Africa platform, are responsible for the Forum's organisation.

But above all, I would like to thank you all, including our international partners, represented here also by the diplomatic community, for your participation and support, because as the old saying goes, we are in this together.

I would like to conclude, as I often do, with a quote from the first President of democratic South Africa, our beloved President Nelson Mandela. Madiba's words of wisdom which are often a source of comfort, inspiration, and motivation.

Yesterday we commemorated the tenth anniversary of Madiba's passing and, in his honour, I would like to recall these remarks, he made at the 90th birthday celebration of one of the other icons of South Africa's freedom struggle, the later Walter Sisulu.

Reflecting in 2002 on the remarkable life of Walter Sisulu, Madiba said:

“What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.”

That is also my wish for the Science Forum South Africa 2023, let its significance not be its mere organisation and our participation, but the difference its outcomes and our actions will make in the life others.

I thank you.