

**THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, TRAINING, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION, HE DR BLADE NZIMANDE, ON THE OCCASION OF THE VIRTUAL SCIENCE FORUM SOUTH AFRICA (SFSA) 2020**

Wednesday, 9 December 2020

The African Union Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology,  
Prof Sarah Anyang Agbor;  
Representatives from South Africa's international science and innovation partners;  
Members of the diplomatic community in South Africa;  
All partners in the South African National System of Innovation – from the public and private sectors, and civil society – and most importantly our youth;  
All participants in the Science Forum South Africa 2020;  
Distinguished guests;  
Members of the media;  
Ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Science Forum South Africa 2020. I am delighted that not even COVID -19 and its associated challenges deterred us from hosting this important annual event. Although meeting under different and unusual circumstances, the Science Forum South Africa 2020 is in session.

You are all welcomed to South Africa, you home away from home!!!

The Science Forum South Africa belongs to all with an interest in the crucial role science plays in our society. Now more than ever we need conversations about how to best harness the immense potential of science for the betterment of our society.

It was therefore important for our Department of Science and Innovation to ensure that the year 2020 does not conclude without our traditional Science Forum.

Indeed, since its first organisation in December 2025, the Science Forum has not only become an annual highlight on the South African science calendar, but has grown to become one of Africa and indeed the world's leading open science events.

The SFSA is an event, which celebrates and promotes a scientific enterprise, which is open to and inclusive of all of society, in the true spirit of Open Science.

We are therefore delighted to present the 2020 Science Forum South Africa, still hosted in partnership with the Forum's traditional home, the CSIR International Convention Centre, but on a digital platform.

Whilst for this year we may have to forego the animated conversations and vibrant networking within the Corridors of the Convention Centre, I have no doubt that the rich programme presented, will still do justice to the Forum's leitmotiv of igniting conversations about science.

In this regard, I would like to thank all partners who have contributed to the organisation of the programme, which in addition to the three-plenary session, comprises no less than 44 parallel sessions organised over the next three days. It is a programme rich in quality, diversity and relevance.

My special thanks go to the Human Sciences Research Council's Radical Reason Consortium of South African scholars from the social sciences and humanities for their contribution.

One of the salient conclusions when analyzing the global science response to COVID-19, is that the contribution of the social sciences, is crucial for any intervention, whether biomedical or other, to succeed.

I am therefore delighted that the social sciences and their interrogation of key societal challenges feature prominently on this year's programme, the highlights of which, will be presented by the HSRC CEO, Prof Crain Soudien later today.

We are also immensely grateful for the support of our international partners, many of whom have urged us to proceed with the organisation of this year's event, and will be presenting sessions on a range of topical issues. In this regard, I would like to recognize the contribution of the European Union, with several sessions presented by European diplomatic missions in South Africa, grouped together under the banner of Team Europe, as well as the European Commission's Joint Research Centre.

South Africa is privileged to enjoy a strategic science and innovation partnership with the European Union and I am grateful that we are able to draw on the support of the European South African Science and Technology Advancement Programme for the organisation of the 2020 Forum.

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues and friends;

There are three key objectives, which I hope the 2020 Forum and the discussions over the next three days will achieve.

Firstly, I am hopeful, that the views from stakeholders on the key science policy issues to be debated, will inform and enrich the development of South Africa's new Decadal Plan, for science, technology and innovation currently in preparation.

Secondly, it is my wish that the Forum, even if hosted on a digital platform, will continue to seed new science and innovation partnerships, especially those with pan-African and global dimensions.

Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, the discussions on the burning societal challenges, should be translated into concrete action, which will make a qualitative difference, especially among the most vulnerable in our society. SFSA 2020 is indeed an important milestone on the road to South Africa's hosting of the World Science Forum under the theme of Science for Social Justice.

In order to contribute to setting the scene for proceedings over the next days, I would like to briefly reflect this afternoon on these three key objectives for SFSA 2020.

Our Decadal Plan will constitute the implementation framework for the translation into action of the policy intents set out in South Africa's 2019 White Paper on Science, Technology Innovation.

One of the policy tenets, which will underpin the Decadal Plan, is a commitment to Open Science. The debate on Open Science during this Forum will assist us to better create a more enabling policy framework for Open Science in South Africa to flourish.

Other policy objectives, which will benefit from the Science Forum discussions, for example include enhancing technology transfer from academia to industry, or to more effectively support skills development for the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The Department of Science and Innovation's key mission is to be the custodian of a National System, which is efficient and sensitive in responding to the needs of our society. Our National System of Innovation consists of and is dependent on partnerships. Indeed, the success of our Decadal Plan will also be dependent on partnerships.

The Forum's ability to bring together of public, private and international partners to identify new opportunities for collaboration and enhance existing partnerships, is, thus, one of its key attributes and objectives.

I am, thus, delighted that the 2020 programme will launch and celebrate several new partnerships such as for example the new South Africa – China cross-border incubation programme for start-up enterprises. Especially important will be the reflection on partnership initiatives to support pan-African cooperation and integration in science and innovation.

The Forum will reflect on a number of programmes initiated under South Africa's Chairship of the African Union in 2020, including several responding to COVID-19. This will for example include a new platform to build capacity for the rendering of science advice to inform policy- and decision-making in Africa.

A warm word of thanks and deep appreciation to Commissioner Anyang Agbor, who will speak after me, for the African Union Commission's outstanding and consistent support to the Science Forum since 2015. Commissioner, this indeed also your event, an event for all of Africa.

Our Decadal Plan and the Science Forum, and the partnerships they foster and sustain must, however, concretely impact for the better the lives of all in our society. It cannot be immune from or conduct its business in isolation from the South African and indeed global new fourfold crises of COVID-19; deepening economic crisis; locally and globally; the multiple crises of socio-economic sustainability for families, households and communities, and Climate Change.

The 2020 Forum will interrogate priority societal concerns such as gender-based violence, the plight of those living with HIV-AIDS or are addicted to substance abuse and the fight against unemployment. The event will, thus, be firmly rooted in the daily plight of many of the most vulnerable in our society.

It is my ardent hope that the discussions this week and subsequent action will in a concrete manner contribute to an improvement in the quality of many – whether at a local, national or global level.

COVID-19 has highlighted that we are indeed our one world with shared challenges, which we can only successfully address through true global partnership. In this regard, I look forward to the critical reflection on progress during the past five years in implementing the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank Prof Quarraisha and Salim Abdool-Karim for agreeing to deliver this year's Science Forum lecture on the theme of science for social justice – a theme, which captures what the heart and soul of what our Forum is all about. I very much look forward to their contribution.

I would also like to congratulate Prof Quarraisha and Salim on being awarded the prestigious Magellan Award for their pioneering scientific and societal work over many decades. This Award will be presented to them later today and you will be able to follow the ceremony on the SFSA digital platform. It is a homecoming of sorts for Prof Karim, as he delivered the first ever Science Forum lecture in 2015.

Dear friends, 2020 has been a challenging year. 2021 will be no less demanding as we will have to fulfil our tasks to combat COVID-19 and support sustained and equitable economic recovery with renewed vigour.

If the Science Forum 2020 has made all of us in the world of science more aware of this responsibility; if it has equipped us with new ideas and networks to bolster our efforts; and if it has renewed our own personal commitment to create a better world for all – then we would have achieved our objective – translating science for social justice, from words into action.

I would again like to thank all who contributed to the Forum's organisation.

I will participate in the proceedings with interest and wish each and everyone, an enriching as well enjoyable event. Let's ignite conversations about science, science for social justice.

In conclusion, for those of you who I might not have the opportunity to meet again this year, let me also take this opportunity to wish all who celebrate Christmas a merry Christmas and a prosperous new year 2021.

Ensure that you keep all the COVID 19 protocols. If there is anything this pandemic has taught us, it is the danger of becoming complacent.

We can also reduce infection risk by wearing a mask, wash hands regularly, avoid handshaking, keeping our vehicle windows open, keep our gatherings small, have them outside or in well ventilated venues, and ensure our physical distancing.

Unless we take personal responsibility for our health and the health of others, more people are going to become infected.

Most of all we owe it to ourselves and each other, because this affects us all.

Thank you