

Dr Eugene Mutimura, the Executive Secretary of the National Council for Science and Technology (NCST)

By Aimable Twahirwa;

Promoting incentives aimed at strengthening the link between industry and academia, is one way that Rwanda's National Council for Science and Technology (NCST) is considering to overcome numerous challenges and critical issues for Research and Development.

While some countries have been requested to provide material that broadly describes policies related to science, technology and innovation, Rwanda has so far managed to implement new initiatives aimed at involving stakeholders in the setting of research priorities.

According to the Executive Secretary of NCST, Dr Eugene Mutimura, a holistic approach to these efforts was to establish public/ private partnerships in Research and Development with the purpose to enhance business participation and encouraging private sector to invest in research.

Dr Mutimura explains that during the first implementation phase of projects under Science Granting Councils Initiative (SGCI) for which purpose was focusing on strengthening the ability of science granting councils, Rwanda managed to publish two calls that encourage academia-industry collaboration.

Since its inception in 2015, SGCI has been strengthening the capacities of science granting councils (SGCs) in 15 sub-Saharan African countries to support research and evidence-based policies that will contribute to economic and social development.

In line with this commitment to support knowledge exchange with the private sector, NCST has used financial incentives to promote a better alignment with approaches to knowledge exchanges and technology transfers with industry.

Collaborative projects with private sector

According to the NCST, as of today, shining examples of fruitful collaboration between universities and industries focused on the country's national priority areas.

Yet some of these collaborative projects have finished with tangible result, where by many ideas from research in universities have been put to use through collaboration between universities and private sector actors, Felly Migambi Kalisa, senior analyst at NCST, mentions trainings and workshops as other SGCI's instruments that were used in Rwanda for building capacity of Private Sector to advance innovation.

Endeavors to find solutions to complex social, environmental and economic challenges – for example, in sustainable energy, agriculture, and food security, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals to end poverty and hunger – have increasingly required collaboration between universities and industry because few organisations have the internal capacity to deliver results on their own.

Merit-based fund

Since last year, NCST established the “Excellent Research Grant” call in a bid to implement the National Research Innovation Fund (NRIF), the primary vehicle for scientific research and technological innovation public support in Rwanda.

The NRIF's goal is to develop citizen-centric, knowledge-based solutions to social problems, develop research excellence and foster innovation and technology advancement.

Universities, academics and the National Council of Science and Technology also wish to see results from research put into practice.

With the commercialization and monetization of intellectual property (IP), Dr Mutimura also encourages Rwandan scientists and engineers to take advantage of this merit-based fund to generate and use original knowledge to benefit Rwanda, the region and beyond.

Capacity building

In the Rwandan context IP administration has now been moved from the Ministry of Trade and Industry to Rwanda Development Board (RDB) as part of on-going legal and commercial reforms aimed at facilitating business entry and commercial activities while strengthening university-industry ties.

“A key element in the first implementation phase of this initiative has also been to encourage collaboration between science granting councils,” Dr Mutimura explains.

Through these incentives to motivate researchers, NCST has awarded grants to 11 successful proposals from public and private universities and research institutions in Rwanda.

Currently, officials at Rwanda's NCST take into delight to notice that despite being a new institution, staff at national granting council has acquired knowledge in research management through various trainings and workshops organized by SGCI.

"The processes involved in the complete value chain from proposals to award, were improved and streamlined thanks to various trainings organized," Dr Mutimura said.

Rwanda's National STI Policy has the principal objective of 'Integrating science, technology, scientific research and innovation in a framework that shall include capacity building, technical transfer initiatives and the promotion of innovation, in the context of issues facing the country.

The programme focuses on priority areas, including agricultural productivity, geothermal energy and geosciences, appropriate technology, food processing and food technology, clean drinking water and sanitation, and bio-fuels among others.