

2014 IASP Africa Division Conference lays a Solid Foundation for a Knowledge-based Economy

The establishment of science and technology parks in Africa finds its rationale in the willingness of African countries to seek greater competitiveness of their economies through improved achievement of their scientific, technological and innovation potential says McLean Sibanda president of the International Association of Science and Technology Parks (IASP) and Areas of Innovation (AI's) Africa Division. Sibanda, who is also CEO of The Innovation Hub in South Africa, was speaking at the just ended 2014 IASP Africa Division conference that took place at Gaborone International Convention Centre (GICC) from the 9th to the 11th April, 2014.

Botswana Innovation Hub in association with the Southern Africa Innovation Support (SAiS) programme, BoFiNET, Dimension Data, BOCRA, Botho University and Orange Botswana hosted the 2014 IASP Africa Division Conference. The conference brought together leaders, experts, and professionals from science and technology parks, areas of innovation, technology-based incubators, (all collectively referred to as "STPs & AIs") academia, the public sector and businesses.

The theme of the conference was, 'Science and Technology Parks (STP's) expanding economic frontiers in Africa.' The conference had three sub-themes, the first being *Science Parks and Economic Diversification* which discussed the role STP's play in addressing job creation and socio-economic challenges. The second sub-theme, *Africa and Innovation*, discussed the challenges in the continent that science, technology and innovation can and is addressing. The final sub-theme, *Science, Technology and Sustainable Development* discussed the role of STP's and AI's in sustainable development, with particular emphasis on sustainable energy production, water conservation, waste management, service delivery and productivity in Africa.

IASP is the worldwide network of science parks and areas of innovation with over 388 members in 71 countries. The association connects professionals managing science, technology and research parks and other areas of innovation and provides services that drive growth and effectiveness for its members. Botswana Innovation Hub is an affiliate member of IASP while it works on its operations, service offering and membership volume to qualify for full membership.

In an scenario where, "it is now generally accepted that Africa is the richest continent in the world by natural resources but the poorest by bank balance, Africa's blessings must not just be seen in its numerous resources, its biodiversity or its topographical beauty but in its people who are a spiritual and physical resource." The advent of the knowledge-based or weightless economy where the economy is driven by people and their interaction and production in the exchange of both explicit and tacit knowledge recognizes people as the most important pillar of business success and information as a critical resource that is essential for the knowledge-based economy.

This view is supported by Barbra Jansen who states that, "Information is the currency for knowledge and a social and economic asset whose acquisition enables one to form intelligent opinions and sound business decisions." She asserts that information is a prerequisite for the development of any individual, organization or nation and is widely regarded as the most democratic form of power, and that power in the politics and economies of the future will flow to those who have the best information and knowledge.

Officially opening the conference, Vice President of the Republic of Botswana, Hon. Dr Ponatshego Kedikilwe said the recognition of the economic value of knowledge has created an enabling environment for the establishment of science and technology parks. Dr Kedikilwe said science and technology parks have set out to rewrite the African economic order by addressing the African puzzle of abundant resources in the midst of poverty and how the continent can address this by providing unique platforms for knowledge-based economies that diversify and expand African economic frontiers.

Dr Kedikilwe said that innovation plays a pivotal role to the economic status of countries and that it is critical for governments to give support to projects, companies and individuals who show interest in innovation. "It is through innovation that some countries around the world have excelled their economies, hence equipping their people with the necessary tools and support to carry out such projects to sustain their local demands to even the outside markets," revealed Kedikilwe.

He added that with the theme of the conference being, 'Science and Technology Parks expanding economic frontiers in Africa,' it is no doubt that innovation of new ideas and establishment of technology parks by governments such as the Botswana Innovation Hub is a clear indication that African countries are also identifying the importance of innovation as a critical aspect of boosting their economic fortunes.

In his address to the conference, the Director General of IASP, Luiz Sanz said through the establishment of Botswana Innovation Hub, government recognizes the economic challenges that Botswana as a nation and Botswana as a people face as a direct or indirect consequence of being part of the greater global community. He praised the establishment of Botswana Innovation Hub as a game changer that forges the way forward for the country to transform its economy from being resource based to that which depends on knowledge as its main raw material.

The conference delegates came from across the world with presentations from places such as Nigeria (Abuja Technology Village), Morocco (Techno Park), Tanzania, Namibia, Mozambique, Spain, Switzerland, South Africa and many others.

Speaking at the end of the conference, Botswana Innovation Hub CEO Alan Boshwaen said the conference was a resounding success, "From our point of view, the conference achieved the primary objective of deepening stakeholder awareness about the role of science technology parks and areas of innovation and strengthening inter SADC, Africa and international networks that can coalesce further and catalyze action around the conference themes." He said the conference allowed Botswana Innovation Hub to cultivate and leverage a community of experts as well as build a deeper consensus about its role in the Botswana innovation system and the progress made.

For his part, Botswana Innovation Hub's Marketing, Registration and ICT Director, Dr Geoffrey Seleka believes that, "Building on the success of the conference, we are confident that with the commencement of construction of the parks Icon Building, the increasing strategic partnerships that offer professional innovation support, the ongoing and expanding programmes that cultivate a vibrant innovation ecosystem and the growing membership numbers we will soon qualify for full IASP membership. He thank sponsors and participants for a successful conference that builds a solid foundation for the country's knowledge-based economy.

All conference papers have been posted on the conference portal on the Botswana Innovation Hub website: www.bih.co.bw