

Innovation for development

Ruth Marsden explains why science and technology are key to international development issues

The main problem facing development is the ability to harness science and technology as an instrument for development. This was the view put forward by the research and innovations network (Errin) in their seminar on innovation for development in Brussels earlier this month.

Researchers argued that science and technology are the fundamental building blocks of human advancement through international cooperation and are essentially the drivers of productivity development.

The conference heard that two-thirds of the world's population earn little more than €6 per day; compared to a potential of almost €4 trillion for this demographic. With this in mind, it seems that European regions have a lot to contribute – and to gain – from the innovation for development debate. However,

developing countries are still facing challenges and require a lot of support in terms of nurturing their innovation and research capabilities.

With recent developments, such as rising food and energy prices, Errin believe international attention is becoming increasingly focused on the importance of supporting science and innovation and numerous emerging economies have followed a development path focused on supporting local innovative systems. However, developing countries are still facing challenges, particularly due to poor links with international research networks.

Europe has the potential to play a huge and important role in boosting the economic output of developing countries. For example, the European regions demonstrate good practice on how to manage innovation systems and aid the interaction between developing countries and Europe. They help to create sustainable jobs, improve social services and infrastructure, promote health programmes, human capital and ultimately improve government services.

The seminar also looked at initiatives in innovation by individuals in this field, using South Africa and Catalonia as examples. “A move towards a knowledge-based economy is essential,” said Daan du Toit, the minister counsellor for science and technology in South Africa. “Research and knowledge bring development, which brings production.”

Referring to South African innovation, Du Toit went on to explain that this was one of the main difficulties a region may face when trying to identify the needs of products and services in a new environment and the move away from a resource-based economy towards a more knowledge-based economy. Du Toit believes that if this is achieved, it would provide invaluable knowledge about the market and will be useful for the business in the future.

Director for international cooperation for Catalonia, Isidre Sala, looked at the pyramid programme and how the plan has helped Catalonian companies to develop their own business model and their own protocol to identify projects. Defining a Catalan bottom of pyramid business model, Sala highlighted the main areas as sustainability, innovation and collaboration, with the main obstacle being able to identify the need for new products and services in a new environment.

Errin recognises that innovation for development is positively beneficial for all involved. Not only do the developing countries gain more independence and sustainability, but the contributing European region gains new market opportunities for the innovative product, specifically developed for a target population and also the opportunity to extract external finance.

Participants heard, in the concluding statements, that successful development and growth is linked to firm policies, effective finance management and the ability to harness creativity and transfer it to their individual market. ★

"Research and knowledge bring development, which brings production"

Daan du Toit, minister counsellor for science and technology in South Africa