



## CALL FOR AFRICAN INVENTIONS & DISCOVERIES

### SCIENCE WITH AFRICA

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The UN Economic Commission for Africa's (ECA) Science with Africa Initiative is in the process of creating an online observatory for African inventions and discoveries to facilitate their transformation into commercial assets, goods and services, particularly through increasing Africa's share of the world's patents. This is because patents and other intellectual assets have become a key part in the knowledge economy. Business valuations are increasingly based on company patent portfolios, and patent licensing agreements are now the primary vehicle for technology transfer. In recent years there has been a sharp rise in the importance of patents as tools for fostering technological innovation, competitiveness and economic growth. However, awareness among on the protection of African discoveries and inventions is not widespread on the continent. Recognizing this fact, the ECA would like to facilitate linkages with the African private sector and in particular venture capitalists to enable Africans better manage, harness and capitalise on the benefits of their inventions and discoveries. In particular, this initiative will reduce biopiracy that is currently rampant on the African continent.

For instance, the medicinal or nutritional properties of many plants Africa can provide enormous economic benefits, which have put patents for naturally existing plants at the centre of an ethical, commercial and legal global debate. One example is the *Hoodia gordonii* bush, which grows in arid regions with high saline soils, such as the Kalahari Desert in Southern Africa. For centuries, indigenous peoples of Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, such as the San, have used this plant to curb appetite and relieve thirst. However, in the 1970s, South African soldiers discovered its benefits during their occupation of Angola, observing that once consumed an individual could forgo water or food for several days. In 1996, scientists at the South African Council for Scientific and Industrial Research were able to isolate the plant extract, which they called *P57AS3*, with the properties already known by the bush people, and recommended it as a supplement to reduce caloric intake. In 1997, Phytopharm laboratory bought the licence to develop and market hoodia. Today, several biotech giants, like Pfizer and Unilever, share the benefits. Only in 2009 will the local peoples have rights to any financial compensation for their traditional knowledge.

There are many similar examples of biopiracy, in which researchers or companies claim unauthorised ownership of living organisms in Africa and the rest of the developing world and the rights to collective knowledge in products and services.

Consequently, if Africans are to gain economic benefits derived from marketing of African traditional knowledge from biological resources, as well as their inventions and discoveries, then there has to be increased awareness and sensitization for policy-makers, scientists/innovators/researchers. As a result, the Observatory for African inventions and discoveries will be launched during the **Second Science with Africa Conference which will be held 23-25 June 2010 in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia** and will focus on:

- 1) increasing the role of the private sector in S&T activities as well as strengthen the exchange of knowledge and experience between industry, science and government
- 2) recognizing African scientific innovations and inventions, leading to,
- 3) maximising the economic benefits of patents and steps to increase Africa's scientific outputs.

The conference, which will be ground-breaking, will lead to a number of positive outcomes, such as initiatives:

- ▶ to increase Africa's share of patents;
- ▶ private sector initiatives in support of scientific development on the continent,
- ▶ support for African SMEs in use of patents in job creation and poverty reduction, and
- ▶ a programme of work to strengthen policy-making in innovation for development in Africa, including R&D strategies for economic growth, as well as strategies for commercializing African R&D as a result of patent registration.

Other special events of interest to inventors will include

- ▶ **An Innovation Fair**, where individuals, universities and institutions will be able to get information on how to patent their inventions.
- ▶ **Financing Forum** will involve a brainstorming session with international venture capitalists and African bankers to discuss the merits of selected inventions and their prospects for commercialization.
- ▶ **Intellectual Property Rights Clinic**, for government agencies on the importance of protecting IP for innovation and competition.
- ▶ **Special Clinic** for Women Inventors
- ▶ **An S&T Exhibition**









**9. Please provide contact information (Name of inventor, Title, Institution and area of expertise, Contact information)**

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**<http://www.uneca.org/sciencewithafrica/main.html>**