

UNESCO Chairs and Partners Forum

Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future

Under the patronage of H.E. Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Addis Ababa, 30 September - 2 October 2024

Context

At this inflection point in global development, the future of humanity faces an urgent choice between “breakdown or breakthrough”. The “choices we make, or fail to make, today could result in further breakdown and a future of perpetual crises, or a breakthrough to a better, more sustainable, peaceful future for our people and planet”.¹ It is an existential choice between continuing on an unsustainable path, or radically changing course.² Knowledge is key to radically changing course toward a more just and sustainable future. Knowledge is what gives meaning to the world around us, shapes our understandings, and guides our actions. Yet, dominant models of knowledge generation, validation, distribution, and ultimately use, can no longer respond effectively to the intersecting multi-dimensional crises we face today.³ Radically changing course to ensure more just and sustainable futures requires a transformation of the ways in which we generate and use knowledge. Additionally, there is need for reformulation of the public dimension of knowledge, science, and innovation, particularly as it has implications within the education and skills development systems in Africa. We must transform knowledge if we are to shape alternative futures of humanity. This is also encapsulated in Agenda 2063, Africa's development blueprint and master plan for transforming Africa into the global powerhouse of the future, with the vision of “An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the global arena”.⁴

The future of humanity is inextricably linked to Africa's future. Yet, established narratives around the future of the continent continue to reflect the long-standing imbalances in knowledge production and in academic research on Africa. Research remains largely dominated by institutions in, or with close links to, the Global North. Reframing the narrative around Africa's future requires the mobilization of diverse knowledge traditions. Africa is a continent with immense potential for growth and development. However, one of the key challenges hindering progress is the limited access to and utilization of knowledge resources. Transforming knowledge systems is crucial for Africa to overcome the existing barriers and unlock its full potential for

¹ UN. 2021. [Our Common Agenda](#). Report of the Secretary-General. New York.

² UNESCO. 2021. [Reimagining Our Futures Together: A new social contract for education](#). Report of the International Commission for the Futures of Education.

³ UNESCO. 2022. [Transforming knowledge for just and sustainable futures](#).

⁴ African Union Commission. 2015. [Agenda 2063: The Africa we want](#).

sustainable development. The opportunities offered to younger generations for many decades to come will be shaped by how well Africa harnesses knowledge and innovation. There is therefore need for a paradigm shift in how knowledge is generated, shared, and used in Africa, paving the way for a more just, sustainable, and prosperous future. There are profound implications for the futures of higher education and research. A new 'planetary consciousness', drawing upon all the 'archives of the world', is needed to pave the pathways of tomorrow in the context of today's 'techno-ecological' crises.⁵ Acknowledging, valuing, and mobilizing diverse ways of knowing and understanding the world in the current juncture of global development has implications for the ways in which we design and conduct research, with whom, and for what purposes.

The co-construction of a shared research agenda for the future of Africa must draw from diverse yet complementary forms of knowledge, perspectives and contexts. It implies interdisciplinary, inter-sectoral, cross-cultural, and forward-looking approaches nourished by diverse ecologies of knowledge, that includes valuing and integrating indigenous knowledge systems. A collaborative research agenda further calls for fair and equitable partnerships among universities, think tanks, industry, the youth, as well as civil society organizations, social movements, and communities. More inclusive and collaborative partnerships are key to strengthening the capacity of African research and development ecosystems to transform knowledge generation and use for more just and sustainable futures for Africa and the world.

Aim and objectives

The UNESCO Chairs and Partners Forum *Transforming Knowledge for Africa's Future* aims to strengthen interdisciplinary and collaborative research capacity in Africa, including through more inclusive and effective South-South and South-South-North research partnerships.

By mobilizing diverse regional and international research networks, the objectives of the UNESCO Chairs and Partners Forum are to:

- Examine the implications of diverse future scenarios of Africa for research, science, innovation and development ecosystems on the Continent;
- Strengthen collaborative research partnerships and networks between higher education institutions and other research partners in the region and globally;
- Examine and discuss policies and frameworks needed to support knowledge-based economies and innovation-driven societies in Africa;
- Identify and discuss strategies for enhancing access to knowledge, particularly for marginalized communities and underrepresented groups, and dialogue between knowledge systems;
- Discuss the roles of education and capacity-building in nurturing a knowledge-driven society and building a skilled workforce for the future, especially at the tertiary level;
- Create a platform for knowledge exchange, networking, and collaboration among research stakeholders from Africa and beyond.

⁵ Mbembe, A. 2023. [Pathways of tomorrow: contribution to thinking commensurate with the planet](#). Education Research and Foresight Working Paper 32. Paris, UNESCO.

Approach

Convened within the framework of the AU Year of Education, the Forum will critically engage with scenarios of projected probable futures and creatively explore alternative possible futures for Africa. In doing so, the Forum will address a range of issues such as: health and well-being; educational transformation; youth, employment, and work; women's rights and gender equality; the ecological and digital transitions; open science, technology and innovation; peace and security; development financing; and governance. The Forum will also explore the implications of these diverse scenarios on research approaches, priorities, and capacity and the way in which networks and partnerships can be diversified in order to strengthen African higher education and research ecosystems. It will therefore contribute to Campus Africa, one of the Flagship Programmes of UNESCO's Priority Africa (2022-2029), and the review of the African Union's Continental Education Strategy for Africa (2016-2025) and planning for the future. The Forum aims to catalyze a collective effort towards building a knowledge ecosystem that serves the continent's unique needs and aspirations, and ultimately a brighter future for all Africans.

The Forum draws inspiration from the African Union's 2063 vision, as well as the upcoming UN Summit for the Future and the *Pact for the Future*. It will further draw on the report of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our Futures Together: A new social contract for education (2021)*, the report of the independent expert group on universities and the 2030 Agenda, *Knowledge-driven Actions: Transforming higher education for global sustainability (2022)*, as well as UNESCO's Higher Education Roadmap 2030, *Beyond Limits: New ways of reinventing higher education*.

Participants

Organized jointly by UNESCO and the African Union Commission, Department of Education, Science, Technology, and Innovation (AU/ESTI), the in-person Forum will convene some 500 participants, primarily from the regional and global network of UNESCO Chairs. They will be joined by participants from African and international research partners and networks, African think tanks, civil society organizations, industry representatives, as well as other regional and international development partners.

Provisional agenda

Day One – Monday 30 September ENVISAGING AFRICA’S FUTURE	
08:00-09:30	Registration and welcome tea/coffee
	HIGH LEVEL OPENING SESSION
09:30-10:00	Welcome Remarks
10:00-10:20	Opening Address
10:20-10:30	Presentation of the Pact for the Future
10:30-10:40	Interlude
10:40-12:00	<p>Panel Discussion Transforming Knowledge for Africa’s Future</p> <p>Leading thinkers outline the contours of current debates about knowledge for Africa’s future and engage with themes examined in the Pact for the Future, including science, technology, and innovation, to youth, education, and employment, to peace and security and development financing.</p>
12:00-14:00	Lunch
14:00-15:30	<p>PLENARY PANEL DISCUSSION I ENVISAGING AFRICA’S FUTURE</p> <p>Envisaging alternative futures of Africa from diverse perspectives and examining their implications for the transformation of research ecosystems in Africa.</p>
15:30-16:00	Tea/coffee break
16:00-18:00	<p>PARALLEL SESSIONS/WORKSHOPS I This</p> <p>first set of parallel sessions and workshops provides the opportunity for participants to consider the implications for Africa of the Pact for the Future. The sessions largely build on the 2024 series of online UNESCO Chairs Seminars.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peace and Security 2. Financing for Sustainable Development 3. Science, Technology, Innovation and Digital Cooperation 4. Youth and Future Generations 5. SDG4 and Continental Education Strategy for Africa
18:00-21:00	<p>Welcome Reception and Cultural Performances</p> <p>Launch of the Amharic and Swahili versions of <i>Reimagining our Futures Together: A new social contract for education</i>, the report from the International Commission on the Futures of Education.</p>

Day Two – Tuesday 1 October
IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICA’S RESEARCH ECOSYSTEMS

09:00-10:30	<p>PLENARY PANEL DISCUSSION II FUTURES OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA</p> <p>Leading experts share their perspectives on the transformation of higher education system in Africa.</p>
10:30-11:00	Tea/coffee break
11:00-12:30	<p>PARALLEL SESSIONS/WORKSHOPS II</p> <p>This second set of parallel sessions/workshops focuses on the various programmes of work within UNESCO’s Priority Africa initiative, addressing higher education, history, culture, technologies, science and innovation.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. UNESCO’s Campus Africa Initiative 2. General History of Africa 3. African Cultural Heritage and Development 4. Emerging Technologies and Sustainable Development in Africa 5. Open Science, Innovation and Technology 6. Continental Education Strategy for Africa
12:30-14:00	<p>Reception on the occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (IICBA)</p>
14:00-15:30	<p>PLENARY PANEL DISCUSSION III DIVERSIFYING KNOWLEDGE AND FOSTERING INCLUSIVE RESEARCH, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION</p> <p>Addressing the critical need for more inclusive research that draws upon the diverse knowledge systems and cultures of Africa to ensure that science and technology is better capable of addressing societal needs.</p>
15:30-16:00	Tea/coffee break
16:00-18:00	<p>KEYNOTE LECTURE AND PANEL DISCUSSION FUTURES of SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION in AFRICA</p> <p>A future-oriented appraisal of the link between science, technology, and innovation with sustainable development in Africa.</p>
18:00-21:00	Official Dinner and Cultural Event

Day Three – Wednesday 2 October
STRENGTHENING COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS and NETWORKS

09:00-10:00	<p>DIALOGUE STRENGTHENING COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS</p> <p>Strengthening capacities for research and innovation through more equal partnerships, including through the UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks.</p>
10:00-10:30	Tea/coffee break
10:30-11:30	PARALLEL SESSIONS and WORKSHOPS III
11:30-12:30	Thematic Meetings I: UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks
12:30-14:00	Lunch
14:00-15:30	Thematic Meetings II: UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks
15:30-16:00	Tea/coffee break
16:00-17:00	CLOSING PLENARY

Partners

With the generous support of the African Union and the governments of France, Sweden and Switzerland, as well as the technical support of the following partners:

