

Budget Debate on Vote 35: Higher Education, Science and Innovation

Speech by Chantel King MP

DA Shadow Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation

Science and innovation must be at the center of economic recovery and renewal

The world is changing rapidly and fundamentally.

Technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics, big data analytics and quantum computing have the potential to revolutionize how we operate across the economy and South Africa has been instrumental with pivotal research and innovation through initiatives like the research and infrastructure road map, the circular economy, grassroots innovation, living labs and renewable energy to name but a few. Cross-cutting through to various sectors in society.

Besides South Africa taking the lead on the African continent with ICT innovation through initiatives from the Department of Science and Innovation, our innovation on the international arena is a testament of the SKA initiative and cutting-edge genomic research from KRISP.

However, despite all these developments and achievements in the area of science and innovation in South Africa and on the African continent, the impact in the lives of ordinary South Africans is minuscule.

We cannot have bragging rights for our success in innovation when loadshedding is raising questions on our ability to translate innovation into practice, our e-health systems are failing the vulnerable people of Pefferville from quickly accessing health care, when the postal and communication services do not have the technology for SASSA beneficiaries at Enoch Mgijima municipality to access much needed funds, when children still die in pit toilets, and when agricultural technologies do not quickly translate into sustainable food security.

These inconsistencies of science inputs vs science outputs primarily are factors of decades of under-funding, incoherent and fragmented governance, corruption and political support undermining the country's National System of Innovation. The NSI is even more under threat from structural challenges and declining human capital in the science and innovation sector, culminating into disinvestment from the private sector and foreign investors.

In 2022, Africa's investment into research and innovation was a mere 1.3%, with an output of only 2%. South Africa's investment into R&D a dismal 0.62% of GDP. Loosely translated it

means that key performance indicators will not be met, completion of projects will be set back by a few years and research funding will not reach young upcoming doctoral students.

The key question is whether in a middle-income country riddled with rising unemployment there is political will to address the deep fragmentations, the lack of policy consonance and the shift towards an understanding that South Africa needs a focused, vibrant, creative, innovative and a fully funded science system to benefit all South Africans. Yet, how do we advocate for foreign direct investment for research and innovation from our international partners when this government spend R93 million for maintenance of Ministers houses? Where is the logic in this?

Minister here is a proposal, place the National Advisory Council on Innovation in the office of the presidency to ensure fit for purpose scientist and innovators direct innovative policy initiatives to every sector in our economy to give true meaning to economic recovery and renewal. NACI's position in the Presidency will decisively look at leveraging science and innovation to develop human capital capacity from grassroot level, increase R&D to 1% by 2024 and integrate science outputs to attract private sector investments and collaborative engagements to address structural deficiencies so that the most rural areas can gain form science initiatives.

This institutional arrangement will be better structured to ensure South Africans do not fall victim to a digital divide because of high data cost for internet connectivity, a lifeline to access job opportunities, access health care facilities and access to a mix of teaching and learning platforms.

The Western Cape is clear on their mandate to be the innovative hub in South Africa with a 46% tech startups base. In 2019, Cape Town had the largest telecommunication market and the most venture capital activity in South Africa accounting for 75% of the country's venture capital deals. They know to be a smart city, will open the door to more startups, which will boost their economic growth and decrease their unemployment rate.

The Western Cape is not only focusing on innovation hubs, but also access to digital communication via WiFi connectivity in public spaces, especially so that young people can embrace new social media platforms to unlock a potentially powerful means of fostering social inclusion. The City of Cape Town has launched a R1.2 billion solar plant project in order to become self-reliant on energy and rid themselves from the darkness of loadshedding.

Minister, there is no magic bullet to fast-track innovation without growth investment in R&D and a strong political will to put science and innovation at the heart of economic development, leaving no one behind in the process. These should be lessons learned from your partner in BRICS, China.

Minister Nzimande, we cannot solve problems with the same thinking we used to create them. Only economies able to adapt will survive. Change is coming whether you like it or not. Under the new government in 2024, science and innovation will be the focus of South Africa's social and economic trajectory and racial quotas will not be used to deter minority groups from being active citizens and participants in the science and innovation sectors in the country of their birth.

Just like in 1969, the impossible was made possible with the first moon landing, in 2024 these naysayers on my right will experience the wrath of South Africans at the moonshot elections when the impossible becomes possible!