

NEWS

Nigeria ready for huge science spend

The politics of Nigeria's government, known for its corruption and squandering of oil money, could diplomatically be described as hard to predict. But if plans due to be discussed by parliament later this year come to fruition, the nation's research base will undergo a dramatic transformation.

With its coffers boosted by oil exports, Nigeria is considering creating a US\$5-billion endowment fund for science and technology — an investment that would generate a research and development budget on a par with many developed nations, and bigger than those of any of its African rivals.

President Olusegun Obasanjo only gave his backing to the proposal in May, but a final decision could be taken this year, as the president is thought to be keen to push it through before leaving office next spring. "He is determined for this to be one of his legacies," says Folarin Osofimehin, a science policy adviser at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris.

Osofimehin is one of several experts from UNESCO and other organizations that have been working with Nigeria on the plan. The result is a proposal, expected to go before parliament this autumn, to establish a National Science Foundation based on the US organization of the same name.

The foundation would distribute the return on the endowment through peer review of competitive grant schemes, an unusual move for an African nation. Only South Africa uses competition to distribute a significant fraction of its science budget, says Mohamed Hassan, executive director of the Third World Academy of Science in Trieste, Italy, and a member of the board advising Obasanjo.

The foundation would also allow Nigeria to break with African tradition by devoting a large sum of public money to research. South Africa, currently the continent's leading science spender, has an annual budget of around \$200 million. A 10% return on the Nigerian endowment would give the country \$500 million to spend on science every year.

Whether the ambitious target of \$5 billion can actually be reached remains an open question. Foreign experts working on the plan say they are advising Obasanjo to meet the total from government funds. Thanks to Nigeria's extensive oil deposits and current high oil prices, that might be possible. But Osita Ogbu, chief economic adviser to Obasanjo, says that Nigeria will contribute the bulk of the money and approach foreign governments

and donor organizations for the rest.

That could prove a challenge, as Nigeria has long been associated with the abuse of state and donor funds. In the Corruption Perception Index, a league table compiled by the Berlin-based lobby group Transparency International, Nigeria is joint sixth from bottom of 159 nations. Oil revenue has been a particular source of controversy, with senior Nigerian government officials repeatedly being accused of siphoning off revenues.

But observers say that Nigeria is changing its ways. In 2004, for example, Obasanjo opened up the country's oil accounts to external scrutiny. The books revealed that money had been stolen in the

past, but by pledging to keep the accounts open, the government has shown its commitment to preventing future thefts, says Casey Kelso, regional director for Africa at Transparency International. He adds that more than 50 cases of serious financial crime are being processed. "There have been some hopeful developments," he concludes. "Corruption is being tackled."

For foreign donors to be convinced about the endowment and its proceeds, Nigeria will have to pledge to publish clear and comprehensive fund accounts, and to ensure that the peer review is handled by respected scientists. Kelso says that donors might also want to see restrictions put on the amount that can be taken out of the endowment every year and a cap on individual grants.

Foreign advisers say UNESCO is confident enough about the project to have offered a \$200-million loan. The money generated from the endowment is likely to be channelled into areas that Nigeria has already identified as priorities: income-generating fields such as agricultural biotechnology, information technology and satellite launch systems. "We have to see a product at the end of the project," says Ogbu. "This will be research geared towards supporting the economy."

Advisers on the project say they will finalize the details over the summer and present the result to parliament in September. Ogbu knows that these final months of Obasanjo's presidency could be the only chance to push through the plan: "It has to be set up before he leaves. Otherwise we could have a president without enthusiasm for science." ■

Jim Giles



Growth area: Nigeria is expected to focus funding on areas such as agricultural biotechnology.