



PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Adopted Report of the Portfolio Committee on Science and Technology on its oversight visit to Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lead (Health) Programme at the Medical Research Council on 10 October 2007.

1. Introduction

The Portfolio Committee on Science and Technology exercises oversight over the Department of Science and Technology in line with the constitutional mandate set out in section 55(2) of the Constitution. The Committee resolved to conduct an oversight visit to the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Lead (Health) Programme at the Medical Research Council (MRC) on 10 October 2007.

2. Delegation

The Delegation was as follows:

- (a) Hon. G Oliphant, ANC (Chairperson and Leader of the Delegation)
- (b) Prof. I J Mohamed, ANC
- (c) Hon. B J Mnyandu, ANC
- (d) Hon. B T Ngcobo, ANC
- (e) Hon. S N Nxumalo, ANC
- (f) Hon. J Selau, ANC
- (g) Hon. S Farrow, DA
- (h) Ms Z Jansen, Support Staff
- (i) Mr A Kabingesi, Support Staff

3. Background

The Department of Science and Technology had recently established the National Indigenous Knowledge Systems Office (NIKSO) as one of its Programmes. The aim of NIKSO is to protect and promote African indigenous knowledge systems (IKS). NIKSO is also viewed as the growth engine for IKS knowledge development and knowledge management.

4. Purpose

The Portfolio Committee wanted to familiarize itself with the work done at the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Lead (Health) Programme at the Medical Research Council (MRC) and investigate whether the research conducted are in line with the national priorities of South Africa.

The objectives for the visit were as follows:

- (a) To enhance the understanding of the Committee's Members of IKS and the research conducted at the IKS Lead (Health) Programme at the MRC;

- (b) To investigate whether the research conducted is in line with the national priorities of South Africa.

5. The IKS Lead (Health) Programme

The MRC established the IKS Lead (Health) Programme to promote, develop and protect IK (indigenous knowledge) and IKS and its innovative systems of health through education, research and development. The IKS Lead (Health) Programme receives funding from the National Indigenous Knowledge Systems Office (NIKSO), a Programme of the Department of Science and Technology.

6. Securing and protecting IKS for the future

The objective of NIKSO is to co-ordinate various efforts in collaboration with IK holders and practitioners, researchers, IKS chairs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations, government departments and regional and international partners. NIKSO is sensitive towards developing and implementing IKS ownership processes in South Africa. NIKSO's objective is to ensure that interface products (IP), patents and issues including benefit sharing will be fully implemented.¹

The Department of Science and Technology through NIKSO has integrated IKS in its 10 Year Innovation Plan. The National Research and Development Strategy and the IKS Policy identify IKS as an area of scientific competitive advantage for South Africa. South Africa has 24 000 plant species of which 4000 are used to manufacture medicines. 20 000 tons of medicinal plants are exported from South Africa each year. Investment in the harvesting of IK through documentation from oral sources, systematisation and development hold the potential of contributing to the scientific and technological solutions for the future challenges of poverty and diseases in South Africa. IKS will also preserve and affirm local communities by incorporating these communities into the knowledge economy. The IKS Lead (Health) Programme is in the process of patenting its Malaria Strain. The patenting process and the costs involved were explained to the Committee.

7. Why invest in IKS?

- (a) The National System of Innovation (NSI) will be enhanced if there is further investment in IK.
- (b) The commercialisation of certain types of IKS and ensuring that benefits are equitably distributed to the Knowledge Holders, will contribute to poverty alleviation.
- (c) The local communities will be able to contribute to the knowledge economy. This will be an indication that the knowledge of indigenous and local communities is given serious attention.
- (d) IKS can contribute to Bio-medicine by addressing priority diseases.
- (e) IKS can enhance the potential for food security by developing indigenous foods.
- (f) IKS has economic potential for the technologies related to it.

¹ Opening speech for the TCI Conference on Indigenous Knowledge System delivered by Minister of Science and Technology, honourable Mr M Mangena, www.info.gov.za/speeches

8. Challenges facing IKS

IKS will be continually sidelined due to the following:

- (a) The stigmatization and marginalization of IKS in South Africa.
- (b) The lack of funding for IKS Research Projects. This aspect prevents the IKS Lead (Health) Programme from having the proper equipment, the necessary patent protection and insufficient funds to sponsor the internship programme.
- (c) The inability to include IKS curricula within the mainstream education system.
- (d) The inability to develop IKS programmes within the higher education system in both private and public institutions.

It was pointed out to the Committee that the IKS Lead (Health) Programme and NIKSO wants to prevent the scenario of Hoodia recurring. In this instance, the wealth generated from the Knowledge Holders were not distributed to them and as a result they have remained poor and outside the formal economy.

6. Visit to IKS Laboratory in Delft, Cape Town

The Committee undertook a guided tour of the IKS Lead (Health) Programme's laboratories in Delft. The tour included a visit to the IKS Garden and laboratories where indigenous medicinal plants are cultivated and plant extracts transformed into pills.

7. Recommendations

- (a) The Committee observed that the IKS Lead (Health) Programme had received the same budget for the previous years. This will prohibit the efforts of testing research products and its internship programme. The Committee recommends that the Department of Science and Technology should consider increasing funding to the IKS Lead (Health) Programme.
- (b) The Department of Science and Technology, through NIKSO, should embark on a vigorous campaign to create awareness of the benefits of IKS and in that way curb the stigmatization and marginalization of IKS.
- (c) The Department of Science and Technology, through NIKSO, should focus on strategies and policies that would industrialise traditional medicines.
- (d) The Department of Science and Technology, through NIKSO, should find suitable business partners to ensure not only that benefits are derived from traditional medicines but also that the benefits are distributed equitably to the identified communities and knowledge holders.
- (e) The Department of Science and Technology should draft the appropriate legislation to ensure the equitable distribution of funds generated from Knowledge Holders.
- (f) The Committee had observed that Malaria has been prioritised. The Committee pointed out that there are many countries in Africa conducting research in this area and have developed cures for this illness. This creates a concern that there will be duplication of research. The Committee recommended that the IKS Lead (Health) Programme work

with countries such as Malawi where these problems occur and prioritise other diseases such as HIV / AIDS.

8. Conclusion

Committee concluded that the research conducted at the IKS Lead (Health) Programme is in line with the national priorities of the country and thanked the Department of Science and Technology, Medical Research Council, NIKSO and the IKS Lead (Health) Programme. The Committee resolved that another meeting be scheduled with the Department of Science and Technology, Medical Research Council, NIKSO and the IKS Lead (Health) Programme for further discussions as to the way forward for IKS in the country.

Report to be considered.

Hon. G Oliphant
Chairperson: Portfolio Committee for
Science and Technology

Date