



Rethinking
Research
Collaborative

Case study: Tom Kariuki

Resource materials to support fair
and equitable research partnerships

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Tom Kariuki, Director of Programmes, the African Academy of Sciences, Nairobi, Kenya

Tom Kariuki, an immunologist by training, leads the programme activities of the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) to accelerate world-class research, foster innovation and promote scientific leadership in Africa.

In this case study, Tom describes the vision of the AAS and the evolution of the Alliance for Accelerating Excellence in Science in Africa (AESA), an agenda-setting and funding platform. He reflects on the impact of shifting the centre of gravity for African science to Africa, issues of trust which limit funders' interest in devolving fund management to African organisations, and the importance of investing in institutional capacity to enable sustainable research leadership in Africa.


What is the AESA? Why did you and other funders decide to organise it the way that you did? And what was the vision behind it?

Africa produces only 2.6% of global scientific publications. In addition, according to UNESCO, many African countries are yet to meet the African Union target of spending 1% of their Gross Domestic Product on science and the continent's investment in research and development amounts to 0.42% of the global total; as a consequence, Africa only has approximately 169 researchers per million inhabitants, compared with approximately 2,942 for Europe and 1,772 for the Americas.¹ Only five African universities have consistently made it into international global rankings, while a lack of research infrastructure and resources have led to an average loss of about 20,000 professionals a year to countries outside the continent since 1990.² These challenges collectively slow down the development, translation and use of scientific discoveries to address the myriad of health and development challenges facing the continent.

The AAS is a pan-African organisation with a tripartite mandate to recognise excellence, provide advisory and think tank functions, and implement science, technology and innovation (STI) programmes aimed at addressing Africa's development challenges. In 2015, in partnership with the New Partnership for Africa Planning and Coordinating Agency, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the UK Department for International

1 UNESCO Science Report 2015

2 Economic Commission for Africa and International Organization for Migration (IOM)



Development (DFID) and Wellcome, the AAS launched the initiative Alliance for Accelerating Excellence in Science in Africa (AESA). AESA is the AAS' agenda-setting and funding platform; it catalyses investments and implements STI strategies and programmes to engage Africa's brightest minds, foster scientific excellence, inspire research leadership and accelerate innovation in ways that improve lives and shift the centre of gravity for African science to Africa.

The AESA platform is Africa-led, Africa-centred and Africa-specific. It was created to lead the way in setting and aligning an African scientific agenda. AESA and its partners provide competitive grants to African scientists to develop and implement their ideas and to grow their careers. It also builds scientific capacity to create the research facilities and environments needed to retain the continent's best talent. By doing this, we hope to increase the number of scientists five-fold over the next decade.

What is the impact of AESA gaining funding?

Shifting the centre of gravity for African science to Africa means a number of things, including direct allocation of resources to the continent where they are properly managed and strategically allocated to research addressing the continent's most pressing needs. The decision of partners such as Wellcome, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and DFID to shift the management of their programmes – amounting to almost US\$150 million – to AESA is more than just symbolic. It is a vote of confidence in African institutions, their systems, and the future of African science. Critically, the AAS brings an Africa-centric focus and strategy to these programmes, providing a perspective that is in line with the African Union Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA 2024), the continent's blueprint for developing science, which outlines a vision of using STI as a tool to promote economic and social development.

Shifting the management of international programmes to the AAS goes a long way in ensuring that Africa can set its own research agenda and encourages governments to fund research. Increasing government investments is important to maintain ownership of local research and its outputs. The African Union heads of state endorsed AESA at their January 2015 summit. The AAS is using this endorsement to leverage matching funds from African sources.

What worked well with AESA?

International funders give money to researchers or institutions in the North who then distribute it to partners on the continent because of mistrust. It's been said that not every dollar donated to African science goes to supporting science, and that many African institutions face credibility concerns occasioned by individual malfeasance, weak systems and general lack of accountability.



Through AESA, funding is directly given to African researchers.

The AAS flagship programme, Developing Excellence in Leadership Training and Science (DELTAS) Africa, for example, has been a success, demonstrating what African researchers can accomplish if given the opportunity to manage their own funding and supported to build the capacity, institutional bases and systems to do this. The 12 DELTAS Africa programmes, run in eight countries, collectively attracted an additional US\$21m in 2017 from other funding sources. Indeed, the AAS too – through the AESA funding platform model – has attracted additional funders, including the UK Royal Society that provides £25m to support the Future Leaders – African Independent Researchers Fellowship.

To address governance issues and build research management capacities across the continent, particularly in managing finances, the AAS is implementing a Good Financial Grants Practice certification tool that will require organisations that receive grants to demonstrate the requisite professional and financial capacities. This will make African organisations even more attractive to funders and reduce the administrative burdens of having to undertake numerous separate annual audits demanded by a myriad of funders. Funders will, in turn, be assured that their funds are going to recipient organisations with certified capacities to manage the grants.

Do you have any key messages for funders of research in Africa?

It's often said 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.' But we want to take it a step further to say give him a rod with which to fish, to ensure that what you teach him is sustainable. Many funders fund research without leaving capacity in African institutions. Building capacity aids in retaining, attracting and training more scientists.

Furthermore, administrative costs for African research projects ought to include support for infrastructure and equipment. The AAS puts emphasis on not only a critical mass of African scientists, but on the importance of building research and development infrastructure, and strengthening of both research systems management and research uptake mechanisms in the African STI landscape.



Rethinking Research Collaborative

About the collaborative

The Rethinking Research Collaborative is an informal international network of organisations – academics, civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations and research support providers – who are committed to working together to encourage more inclusive responsive collaborations to produce useful and accessible international development research. It first came together to understand and develop principles and practice to support fair and equitable partnerships in response to global development challenges. It is planning a series of initiatives to encourage greater diversity of participation and leadership in international development research.

About these materials

These materials – an introduction, six modules and a set of case studies – provide insights and ideas to support research stakeholders to translate eight principles we have identified for fair and equitable research partnerships into practice. They were written by staff of Christian Aid's Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning, and bring together original ideas with research carried out by the Rethinking Research Collaborative. They were funded by a grant from UK Research and Innovation (NS/A000075/1).

Contacts

Christian Aid Centre of Excellence for Research, Evidence and Learning
020 7620 4444 | RELhub@christian-aid.org | www.christianaid.org.uk/research

The Open University
0300 303 5303 | Jude.Fransman@open.ac.uk | www.open.ac.uk

UK Research and Innovation
01793 444000 | communications@ukri.org | www.ukri.org



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Collaborative partners

