

UN MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FORUM ON STI FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

PANEL DISCUSSION

Joel Netshitenzhe, MISTRA Executive Director

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STRENGTHENING TRUST IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

At the pinnacle of strengthening trust in science and technology is the need clearly to define the very purpose of STI. The primary motivation should demonstrably be the needs of humanity.

In relation to Covid-19 and mRNA technology, for instance, did the plodding research happen within the well-endowed corporate sector? Be that as it may, the efforts to apply this platform to other diseases of concern are commendable. But TB, malaria and other such diseases are not receiving the requisite resources. And so, our generation with huge, sophisticated capacities had to cower in pandemic terror because we did not direct scientific inquiry towards protecting the global commons, and we are still not sufficiently resourcing research, particularly for killer-diseases in the developing world.

The collective leadership, multilateral and otherwise, should lead in shaping the STI agenda with appropriate indicators for monitoring and evaluation.

Trust in STI would also benefit from transdisciplinarity. An integrative process across and beyond disciplines helps embed human values. Covid-19 underlined the importance of a syndemics approach: with attention to health systems; but also, to the socio-political environment. Transdisciplinarity is even more critical for 'dual class' STI, including biotechnology, nuclear power and, now, generative Artificial Intelligence.

Societal partnerships are fundamental to trust – a multiple helix approach, which includes civil society as well as practitioners and repositories of Indigenous Knowledge. This would help reduce the graveyard of exotic research endeavours. South Africa's 2019 White Paper on STI addresses this issue; but good intentions do not easily change the force of habit.

In many countries, where poverty and opulence live cheek by jowl, systematic science engagement is especially critical for public trust. Beyond traditional media in public communication of science, modern communication platforms, and celebrities of science of the Carl Sagan and Wangari Maathai variety, would be of great help.

The messages of the state and social partners will find fertile ground if the leaders enjoy popular legitimacy. Covid-19 underlined the importance particularly of a capable and ethical state. Such effectiveness requires a Pilot Agency at the centre of government with the authority and capacity to integrate public sector endeavours.

All this implies an appropriate resourcing ecosystem for both 'hard sciences', and humanities and social sciences. Disasters are sharpening social contradictions across the globe, and all the sciences can contribute to resolving these contradictions.

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