

NEWS

South Africa may miss one per cent science spend goal

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[CAPE TOWN] South Africa's research and development (R&D) spending dropped in proportion to its GDP in 2007–08 for the first time in more than a decade, casting doubt on whether the country will reach its goal of spending one per cent of its GDP by 2008–09.

Data published in this year's instalment of South Africa's national R&D survey — a document prepared each year to track trends in spending — reveals that joint government and business R&D spending rose by 2.1 billion rand (around US\$280 million) between 2006–07 and 2007–08.

But this increase did not keep up with the country's economic growth with the result that R&D spending dropped from 0.95 per cent of GDP in 2006–07 to 0.93 per cent in 2007–08.

The drop — announced this week (7 December) is the first to be recorded since 1997 when R&D spending was just 0.7 per cent of GDP. South Africa's R&D spending fell sharply in the early days after the first democratic elections in 1994 but has been rising steadily in recent years.

Science minister Naledi Pandor said her department will analyse the figures to see if there is a new trend but it is too late to do anything about the 2008–09 figures, which will be published this time next year.

The one per cent target is still in reach, said Michael Kahn, a South African professor who until last year headed the team that conducts the surveys at the country's Human Sciences Research Council.

"GDP growth in 2008–09 was less than in the previous year. If the gross expenditure on R&D grew faster than in 2007–08, then the one per cent might just be reached," he said.

South Africa's failure to reach the target could breed complacency among African nations gunning for the same goal in 2010, said Taurai Imbayarwo, founding director of the South Africa-based African Science Trackers, a company that tracks and indexes African science output.

"South Africa has the most robust economy on the continent. Most countries would be quick to point out that if South Africa struggles to reach the target, how can others in fragile economic states be expected to do so?" he said.

But Kahn warns against reading too much into marginal year-on-year changes. There is other, more significant news in the survey, he said.

For example, the government increased its funding for university R&D by 53 per cent between 2006–07 and 2007–08. That is a very positive development, he said.



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