



Indigenous Knowledge-Based Technology Innovation Investment Summit

2-4 JUNE 2026

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Synopsis: Indigenous Knowledge-Based Technology Innovation Investment Summit

2-4 June 2026

The [Indigenous Knowledge-Based Technology Innovation Investment Summit \(IK Summit\)](#) held in Johannesburg from 2-4 June 2026 was more than a talk shop. It was a declaration that indigenous knowledge (IK) is not merely a cultural asset, but a strategic resource for sovereign innovation, industrialisation, community development and job creation.

The IK Summit was organised by the [Department of Science, Technology and Innovation \(DSTI\)](#), [National Science and Technology Forum \(NSTF\)](#), The Innovation Hub (TIH) and the universities of [Limpopo \(UL\)](#), [North-West \(NWU\)](#) and [Venda \(UNIVEN\)](#). More than 400 stakeholders including representatives from academia, government departments, research and science institutions, development agencies, funding bodies, businesses, as well as students and graduates from several universities attended to witness the coming together of ancient wisdom and modern science.

Dr Bonginkozi Dladlamba from UL summarised the outcome of the summit best:

Over the past 3 days we have witnessed something significant. We have revived IK-based research and development (R&D) and showcased that Africa has the capacity to develop high level bio-natural products such as African medicines, nutraceuticals, and health infusions. The way forward is a new commitment to research infrastructure and bringing together IK-holders, entrepreneurs, innovation hubs, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME's), and venture capital. IK Systems (IKS) is a frontier science and investment ready."

In the welcoming address, Acting Deputy Director-General (DDG) of the DSTI, **Dr Kenny Tenza** stated that government is committed to strengthening institutional platforms for IK-based research, unlocking entrepreneurship opportunities for young people and expanding market access. He invited captains of industry and private business to partner with government to unlock the huge social potential that IK holds.

Investment against erasure

In his keynote opening address, **Prof Rasigan Maharajh from the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)** claimed that investment in the IK-based technology innovation sector is *investing against erasure*. He stressed that IK innovation and commercialisation is an imperative for redressing neo-colonial *epistemicide* – the systematic destruction of a culture's IK by colonial powers and the imperialist chains of exploitation. Addressing this historical and ongoing injustice is therefore not merely a matter of redress but a fundamental precondition for genuine transformation.

He stated that the polycrisis we are currently facing is deepened by the uneven division of labour. The current world population is estimated to be 8 billion people; Africa is home to approximately 1.5 billion people with 65.45 million people living in South Africa (SA). At a global level, wealth remains highly concentrated with the top 10% owning three-quarters of global wealth while the bottom half holds only 2%.

This is borne out by the fact that 60% of our youth in SA (5.7 million young people) between the ages of 15 and 35 are unemployed. This economic decline is compounded by global multinational enterprises who internalise and patent knowledge while they breach planetary boundaries with the aid of investors and policymakers.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) recently released its Industrialisation Index and found that the South African economy has declined steadily over the years and has been overtaken by Morocco, now the continent's leading industrial economy, driven by sustained industrial upgrading, export diversification and strong industrial policies.

SA's 15-year dominance as the powerhouse on the African continent has ended due to weak regional production links and fragmented industrial ecosystems.

To counter the dominance of highly industrialised G7 countries in the West, SA joined an intergovernmental coalition of major economies that include Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRICS) in 2010. The aim of BRICS is to reform Western-dominated institutions, coordinate economic and diplomatic policies and reduce dependence on the United States (US) dollar.

This move has advanced multipolarity and opened prospects beyond the hegemony of the West. The importance of IK can now finally be realised and developed as the shift in global political economy opens strategic space for the Global South and Africa in particular to assert alternative development pathways rooted in local knowledge, cultural assets and innovation capabilities.

Prof Maharajh concluded that we must move from policy frameworks to tangible, community-centred IK-based technological innovation. Only by doing so can we begin to redress historical injustices, transform our socio-economic circumstances, and meaningfully improve the quality of life for all people in SA, across our continent, and throughout our shared world.

Benefitting from South Africa's rich biodiversity

A third of prescription medicines are derived from natural sources and treat 90% of human diseases. Despite the fact that Africa has the richest biodiversity in the world, and SA among the richest of any country, SA only has 4% of market share in herbal medicines while North America takes 29%, Asia 25% and South America 8%.

Responding to the opening address, **Prof Fulufhelo Netswera** from UNIVEN attributed this disparity to the impact of colonialism and the relegation of IK as inferior. He remembers how Apartheid mercenaries locked away people who produced their own home-grown spirits and closed down traditional breweries. He related how his grandmother treated many ailments with indigenous herbs and plants, but with the dying out of Traditional Healers, this knowledge is in real danger of being lost. Or stolen.

The trademark dispute around Rooibos Tea in 1994 is a case in point. **Mr Victor Kgomo** from UL reminded participants in the summit that an American firm usurped the Rooibos trademark claiming that 'red bush' was a generic term. A US court however ruled that Rooibos (*A.linearis*) infused tea is made from a particular plant that grows in SA and the trademark eventually reverted back to the original South African trademark owners. In 2005, Starbucks used the same strategy to circumvent crediting Ethiopian coffees. Known for his vigorous advocacy work for the economic rebirth of Africa, Mr Kgomo believes that traditional leaders should be protected and IK documented.

This is a huge and unpopular task. A fellow academic on the panel, **Dr Joe Molete** from NWU bemoaned the fact that many students choose to study finance because they believe that they could make more money. Unfortunately, the world's problems wouldn't be solved by financiers. That is why the NWU was one of the first academic institutions to introduce a training programme in IK. This aligns with his passionate commitment to build educational and innovation ecosystems to drive regional economic growth, entrepreneurship and skills development.

The role of academia in growing IKS

The elevation of IK as an academic pursuit is bearing fruit. In a dedicated lab at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), African medicines have been sampled and put through a range of tests to prove efficacy since 2007. The university also collaborates with agricultural research to grow medicinal plants to treat diseases such as diabetes, HIV and cancer. **Prof Nceba Gqaleni** of the UKZN also stated that many SMMEs make use of this facility.

The University of the Free State (UFS) established an African Medicines Innovation and Technology Hub where products including cannabis are tested in clinical trials. Overseeing these processes at the university, **Prof Motlalepula Matsabisa** stressed the importance of developing grassroots innovations and developing products with confidence that is fit for purpose.

Prof Namrita Lal's team at the University of Pretoria (UP) is involved in the scientific validation of medicinal plants for pharmaceutical and medical purposes and developing products for skin disorders, ageing, pigmentation and even toothpaste, to name but a few projects.

Prof Makhotsa Lekhooa claimed that the NWU hosts the only accredited Good Laboratory Practice (GLP) toxicology lab in the country. Undergraduates are trained in IK centres on the Mahikeng campus where they are encouraged to build eco-system value pipelines. While product development is the end goal, sustainable supply is equally important and that is why their cultivation methods are researched so that communities can grow medicinal plants instead of wild harvesting.

Students, innovators and entrepreneurs pitch their IK product ideas

The highlight of the Summit was listening to the presentations of over 40 entrepreneurs and SMMEs presenting compelling IK-based products and business models to a panel of experts and potential investors.

Some of the IK-inspired projects included a natural digestive supplement for cattle, soap made from cow dung, an ambitious plan to farm with ostriches, a project to manufacture skin care products extracted from mopani bark, producing traditional insect repellents, powder and juice products made from the Morenga tree to control cholesterol and liver wellness amongst other ailments, and a project to make wine from pomegranates. Potential investors were asked to consider an initiative to develop and promote donkey milk as a health drink, and were impressed by the product displays at the exhibition of several herbal teas made from Maringa and Honeybush. There were ample beauty and skin care products on show, researched and developed from IK as well as an ambitious project to build a digital IK database for researchers and subscribers. In a similar vein, an entrepreneur came to the summit seeking funding to publish a series of books documenting traditional stories as told by Elders in an effort to preserve African heritage and promote moral and social norms.

From these presentations, several policy implications became clear:

- The first that institution based IK research, development and innovation must be accelerated
- Community beneficiation must be tangible and embedded in commercialisation processes
- Stakeholder partnerships across government, academia, industry and communities must be strengthened
- Access to raw materials, equipment, funding and business development resources must be unlocked.

Transforming IK into a competitive innovation eco-system that creates jobs, economic opportunities and improves the lives of South Africans, specifically people living in rural communities, is top priority.

Main barriers of entry of IK-based products into markets

Dr Dashnie Naidoo-Maharaj joined the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) where research is done to identify new ingredients and chemical markers in plants based on IK. The main reason why SMMEs struggle to get their products to market is because traditional medicines lack scientific backing.

This caused some debate from audience members who questioned why traditional African medicines needed Western validation. It was pointed out that science is universal and not Western. Validation doesn't mean Western validation.

Dr Kaizer Thembo represented the South African Health Products Authority (SAHPRA) at the summit and admitted that the SAHPRA currently doesn't have a framework to regulate indigenous products and that the medicine act of 1965 is out of date. A process of amending the act is under review but when it comes to regulating traditional medicines, public safety is key and to approve new products, scientific validation is needed.

Additional stumbling blocks include:

- The lack of manufacturing facilities
- The lack of business skills among IK innovators and entrepreneurs
- Mistrust amongst traditional healers and researchers

- IK-holders keeping their knowledge confidential and having high expectations for financial rewards
- Ignorance about Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) legislation and licencing
- Bureaucracy, regulation and compliance barriers
- Difficulty in competing with pharmaceutical companies
- Youth disliking the taste of traditional food and medicines
- Perceptions that traditional medicine is 'witchcraft'
- Issues around exploitation
- Unsustainability of wild harvesting
- Registration and quality control of commodity crops
- Government funding departments working in silos and lack of coordination
- Corruption

Strategies for scaling and industrialising IK-based innovation products

The best advice for scaling and industrialising the IK-based sector comes from business and industry partners who participated in the Summit.

Dr Dheepak Maharajh, CEO of **UVU BIO**, a specialised biotech incubator that provides African entrepreneurs and researchers a platform where science, business and investment can come together. He pointed out that most IK holders are in the informal economy and navigating the regulatory and compliance requirements creates a huge gap and stress for the IK holder. He also noted that entrepreneurs move from grant to grant to fund their research products with no clear goal on how to get it to market. He said the products need to go to SAPHRA approved production facilities but IK holders are mostly in rural areas and not in the big metros. Dr Maharajh also suggested that IK holders move away from wild harvesting of medicinal plants to cultivation to ensure sustainable supply. Grant funding is not enough to build the industry. Private capital is available to build rapid product pipelines on products that are a sure bet.

Dr Michael Magondo runs a privately held think-tank and open innovation business incubator called *Wouldn't it be Cool*, that focuses on accelerating commercially viable products that are still stuck in a research mindset. He highlighted the fact that 90% of investment in the tech industry comes from private money whereas 90% of investment into IK is government funded. No business can compete and be sustainable if it's built on grants and subsidies. For scaling and industrialisation, private money is needed that is accounted for and well managed. IK innovators need to be taught to move thousands of units for small profit margins consistently.

Mr Seth Galetuke shared his experience at *Thuni Farms*, the agricultural sector of the Thuni Group that specialises in farm development and community farming projects. While access to land and raw material is often not a problem, the land is not used efficiently. To transition into commercial farming co-ops were established but they operate like social clubs. What is needed is economic change and ensuring that communities benefit from sustainable and shared income.

Dr Patrick Zithubile Toyo from *Tiger Brands* concurred that big corporations like Tiger Brands have huge product portfolios and are profit driven. The Tiger Brands social responsibility development programme targets young people and the previously disadvantaged and in one such project, the company supplies free seeds to tomato farmers in Limpopo but sets standards. In the corporate world there is no money for R&D

and no free bees. Bringing in new IK-products to the company must be motivated and align with the Company's business strategy.

Financial opportunities for entrepreneurs

SEDFA: The mandate of the Small Enterprise Development and Finance Agency (SEDFA), is job creation and economic growth. There are R&D funds available for IK entrepreneurs and **Mr Nkosinathi Dlamini** spelt out the requirements for application. It must be a SA registered company, majority black-owned, and SARS compliant. SEDFA can give business development support and access to markets in collaboration with the Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA) and the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC). Mr Dlamini introduced students and entrepreneurs to a SEDFA initiative called TRAP which stands for *Township and Rural Enterprise Programme* where the focus is on building businesses in rural areas and townships. He urged IK-holders and especially the youth to do their due diligence, provide proof-of-concept and apply for funding.

DBSA: Ms Sipiwe Sibanda informed the Summit that the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA) does not operate in the IK space and only invests money into projects that promise a return on investment (RoI). The bank finances infrastructure development and collaborates with universities and stakeholders to determine what infrastructure and equipment are required to fast-track economic growth. She acknowledged the role IK-based innovation can play in job creation and urged entrepreneurs to know what makes their products special and learn how to sell themselves.

TIA: The objective of the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA) is to support the State to stimulate and develop technological innovation. According to **Ms Tandokazi Quma-Moyo**, the TIA funds infrastructure and platforms through universities. It is therefore advisable that IK entrepreneurs learn what are the requirements of funders are and collaborate with universities.

KAICONNECT: Mr Cebo Mayekiso represented KaiConnect, a developmental agency working towards economic revival. With only 8% of South Africans currently engaged in entrepreneurial activities, it is clear that a new social compact is needed that unites business, labour, communities and government. Although KaiConnect has limited grant money available, the parent company (Barlow World) still expects a RoI. Private capital, Mr Mayekiso stressed, does not flow to ideas. It flows to credible pathways. You might have a good business idea, but it needs to be validated through customer demand and repeat business. KaiConnect will support black entrepreneurs in rural and semi-rural areas but products must derive from IK, it must be scalable and benefit the community. The pathway is from innovation to industry.

Growing IK-based nutraceuticals and health infusion industries

Mr Ben Durham, the Chief Director of Bio-innovation at the DSTI introduced a panel of academics and experts to discuss policies and strategies based on *Ubuntu* that derives value from IK across all government departments.

According to **Dr Daphney Mayindi-Bosch** from the Department of Land Reform and Rural Development (DLRRD), the future of IK depends on three things: Trust, Evidence and Investment. *Trust* is that communities are partners and beneficiaries, *Evidence* is from R&D and innovation that feed credibility and validation. *Investment* is needed for skills development, resources and infrastructure to move products from

labs into sustainable enterprises. SA has such a rich source of biodiversity that can be utilised to grow agricultural, pharmaceuticals, and cosmetics industries. Our challenge is to bring together skills, policies, and regulations to scale what we have. In China and India for example, government stepped in to nurture their infant IK industry into a robust, thriving economy. SA, she believes, stands at the cusp to catapult IK into the economy but success depends on skills development and validating traditional healers, the creation of a diverse workforce and commercialising IK products.

Universities are already collaborating with IK-holders, science councils, industry and business accelerators to achieve this goal.

Prof Ashwell Ndhlala from the *University of Limpopo (UL)* and his students have been engaged in the research of traditional food and medicinal plants since the early 2000's. In partnership with the DSTI and TIA, the university has launched an incubator project involving rural women, to drive commercialisation of lab tested and validated IK products. The university employs community representatives and is in the process of building a small manufacturing hub for nutraceutical research. They also tap into bio-technology expertise in India for skills transfer. Students working in the IK space are funded and the aim is for students to graduate not only with a degree, but with an IK-based product.

Prof Olaniyi Fawole spearheads a futuristic approach at the *University of Johannesburg (UJ)* where agro-cultural processes are developed to keep indigenous food and medicines fresh until they reach the consumer. He believes it is high time that IK is fused with artificial intelligence (AI) and smart processing to become more competitive.

Dr Solomon Mabapa used funding to establish a lab with high-end equipment and an innovation hub at the UNIVEN. Local communities are trained to produce jam from marula fruits that adheres to high standards.

Dr Nomusa Dlamani explained that engineers and scientists at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) profile the chemical compounds of traditional medicines to determine health benefits and toxicity. SMMEs that need analysis and formulation of products can approach the CSIR for assistance.

IK-based product success stories

Setšong Tea Crafters: **Ms Retang Phaahla** is the CEO of *Setšong Tea Crafters*, an indigenous tea manufacturing company rooted in the unique biodiversity of Sekhukhune, Limpopo. Setšong Tea Crafters specialises in harvesting and processing indigenous flora into tea renowned for their health benefits, such as calming nerves, relieving muscle tension, balancing blood pressure, and providing essential nutrients like Vitamin A (Beta-Carotene), Fiber, Calcium, and Zinc. Once these beneficial attributes were tested and validated in university labs, the teas were ready to penetrate mainstream markets. Setšong Tea Crafters now supplies Food Lover's Market, Spar and 80 Dis-Chem pharmacies. Ms Phaahla has created 30 permanent and 15 seasonal jobs. 49% of the business is community owned. With the help of the DSTI, they obtained machinery to increase production, renovate facilities and renovated rondavels into a food safety compliant factory. They are currently speaking to distributors in the US and have found interest for the teas in Asian and European markets.

Thornham Honeybush: Driven by a strong passion for sustainable development and IK systems, **Ms Mirl Cunningham** assumed management of *Thornham Honeybush* in 2020 and currently serves as a Director of the company as well as on the Board of the South African Honeybush Tea Industry Association (SAHTA).

Under her leadership, Thornham Honeybush evolved from a small honeybush seedling nursery into an agro-processing facility focused on value addition, innovation, and community empowerment. The enterprise produces a range of honeybush-based products, such as honeybush green tea infusions, honeybush infused jams, crunchies, and wellness products such as bath salts, all inspired by the health-promoting properties of indigenous honeybush tea.

Prijap Health and wellness: **Mr Prince Msomi's** grandfather was a herbalist for 80 years and lived to the ripe old age of 104. Throughout his life he regularly drank Imbiza, a traditional African herbal remedy. In 2016 Mr Msomi approached the CSIR and the DSTI for funding to establish his Prijap Health & Wellness Company and develop an Imbiza derivative. He worked with UP in a rigorous process of validation and compliance to develop a new medicine inspired by traditional knowledge.

Addressing the problem of IK intellectual property (IP)

Ms Takalani Ramuthaga of the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (**the dtic**) said that the current policy and Intellectual Property Rights Act (IPR ACT 52 of 2008) dictates that IP is owned by universities and research councils who receive funding from government. IP or royalties cannot be sold or transferred without government approval. This is one of the reasons why traditional IK-holders are hesitant to cooperate with innovators and researchers. People determined to protect IP don't understand research and commercialisation processes, hinder development and often discover that the IP has no value.

Mr Nkosinathi Dlamini from SEDFA agrees that IP is a barrier because there is no standard template to formulate licensing and community beneficiation once a product is commercially viable. Institutions and partners in IK need to think about designing systems that reflect on black economic empowerment (BEE), enable entrepreneurs, promote shareholding and make it easier for the private sector to take these products to market.

Looking at the future of IK-based technology and innovation

Ms Jansie Niehaus, Executive Director at the NSTF urged young entrepreneurs to enter the annual NSTF Awards that recognises outstanding contributions to science, engineering, technology and innovation in SA. IK innovators should be seen and heard in order to grow awareness and stand out in the science community.

Ms Komathie Govender, Acting CEO of TIH remains committed to expand support for IP protection and ensure that IK-holders and innovators are empowered to derive value from their inventions.

At the conclusion of the summit **Dr Nomzamo Malindisa** (Postdoctoral Fellow, Internationalisation and Strategic Partnerships, UP) was tasked with summarising the three days and remarked that the summit demonstrated that IK is not merely a cultural asset, but a strategic resource for national competitive edge, community development and sovereign innovation. What is needed is decisive implementation, financial investment and a commitment to an IK-based economy that is globally competitive and locally transformative. Several themes emerged:

- Firstly, the need to employ graduates who can contribute to innovation and economic growth
- A move from policy frameworks to tangible implementation outcomes and a call to invest in people and partnerships
- Recognising the human capital and collaborative eco-systems are central to success

- The imperative to protect village know-how and ensuring that IK holders are recognised, respected and empowered
- Lastly, the affirmation that the IK-Based Technology Innovation Investment Summit is now a strategic flagship of the NSTF, signalling long-term institutional commitment

The closing plenary reinforces the idea that industry, government, regulatory bodies, science councils and higher education institutions share a common vision:

IK is the foundation for sovereign innovation, economic transformation and community empowerment. With clear policy direction, strong institutional commitment and financial