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Science Advocacy in Africa

Introduction

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, an “advocate” is a person who works for a cause or group. It follows from this definition that a science advocate is a person who works for a scientific cause. This cause can be research funding and policies, climate change, low enrolment in basic sciences, lack of awareness about the role of science in development, among others. The importance of advocacy lies in its ability to cause students to choose careers in science, help the government to understand the value of science in development, and to educate the public on healthy living. In Africa, the term science advocacy has been limited by many scientists to talking to the government on policies. As such, many passionate young students and scientists get discouraged due to lack of expertise, no motivation, limited time, among others. Engaging young people and scientists into science advocacy by setting a platform on which they can flourish would go a long way to foster the study of science and secure the future workforce of science—Africans would grow to support their own scientists/research and would not over depend on “Western funders,” which might lead to crisis like the one that happened in AAS [1]. In this letter of interest, I would present some advocacy initiatives that can help us to advance the study of science in Africa.

1. Introduction of science advocacy in graduate programs

The concept of science and citizen implies that everyone who does science should advocate for it. Postgraduate should be taught about challenges in science advancement and how they can contribute to solving them. During this course, students should be educated on the scientific challenges faced by their communities and ways to solve them. As a follow-up of this training, the students would be expected to render some services to their communities like coordinating science club activities in secondary schools, organising science expos and cafés, attend a meeting at the parliament, commemorate scientific events, organise science competitions, and so on. Science communication should also be included in such program in a bit to help students know how to communicate their research to the public—Africans can fund big research projects if they are well communicated. If there is resistance from the administration to introduce this course, a series of workshops should be organised at the departmental levels to initiate students into advocacy [2]. During these workshops, experts should be invited to share their experiences with the students.

2. Institution of a rewarding system for science advocates

Incentives should be given to people involved in grassroot advocacy in a bit to motivate them, for advocacy is demanding both financially and otherwise. This recognition would open the eyes of others to see the worth of what they are doing. The reward must not be financial; these people can be given the opportunity to participate in decision making forums in their domain of interest. While the IUPAP focuses on senior scientists, there should be other bodies that focus on younger scientists and local scientists.

3. Identifying and networking with non-governmental organisations involved in advocacy

Many organisations advocate for scientific causes, though they do not have adequate knowledge like scientists. They mostly do it out of passion, and they usually have a better understanding of the public than scientists. Scientists should partner/collaborate with such bodies, since they are advocating for the same cause. Another way of partnering with these organisations is to join our voices with them on social media platforms and welcoming their invitations for talks.

4. Annual conferences and workshops on science advocacy and policy in Africa by science societies like AAS

An annual workshop should be organised by the African Academy of Science (AAS) where scientists can talk about the advancement of science in African. Some policy makers can also be invited, to build network with them. This initiative has been adopted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) [3]. Science societies in Africa should be strongly encouraged in such gatherings to commemorate international scientific events as is not the case. Such days are dedicated to the science communities to showcase their works, worth, and products to the public, but they often neglect such opportunities.

5. Awareness on the need for increased online (social media) presence of scientists

Tweeting by renowned scientists in America and Europe is a way of communicating science to the larger

audience, but this altitude is not practiced in Africa reason why the public remain disconnected from science. For instance, this year has been set aside by UNESCO as the International Year of Basic Science for Sustainable Development (IYBSSD2022) and there exist a Facebook page with almost zero engagement [4]. We are the ones to sell ourselves to the public. Scientists should develop the habit of engaging with the public through social media, especially in things that concern them, for they are better trusted than the politicians due to their expertise. A workshop would help them to achieve these skills.

References

[1] doi: 10.1038/d41586-021-02991-9

[2] doi: 10.7490/f1000research.1113687.1

[3] <https://www.aaas.org/programs/catalyzing-advocacy-in-science-and-engineering>

[4] <https://www.facebook.com/IYBSSD2022/>

Primary Category

Community Engagement

Secondary Category

Physics Education

Subgroup categories

NONE

Did you / will you submit this LOI to another category?

NO

Additional Information

NONE

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