

Regional innovation ecosystem needed for development, survival and growth

THE concept of innovation ecosystems really struck me last week.

Odd really, given that I have been working with the Regional Innovation Forum for a number of years, and work at a university that is part of the national system of innovation.

So what was my epiphany and why now?

I was asked to make a presentation in Sweden last week on the challenges of commercialising university research in developing countries.

After my presentation – at which I presented some examples from NMMU and some of my observations working across Africa – a Swedish colleague presented his observations.

He and his colleagues have tools and frameworks which allow researchers to determine the impact of their research.

This is critical as many researchers are doing fantastic work and produce wonderful outputs, but do not always know how to translate these into outcomes and understand how they can make an impact.

He has been running work-

Innovation conversation



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shops with researchers in East Africa on the use of these tools and frameworks with great results.

But he is still not sure that the outputs will actually be able to make an impact.

And something I said struck him: “Projects don’t fall off the end of my table, they just keep piling up as we get more and more involved further downstream in innovation projects.”

And the reasons for both of these? Lack of an innovation

ecosystem. Projects which cannot leave the university effectively because there is nowhere for them to go.

There are very few incubators. Fewer entrepreneurs. Little or no venture capital. Very few companies willing to look at new technology.

Governments who have too many challenges to prioritise innovation, even if they know it is the way to growth and development.

That really struck me as I saw what we had been battling against for all these years.

I had just thought it was the challenge of doing innovation in South Africa.

Suddenly the discussions with our national Department of Science and Technology on regional innovation systems made sense; the purpose of the Regional Innovation Forum is clearer; the creation of an innovation ecosystem is not just a nice-to-have – it is the only thing that makes sense if we want to move ahead.

So what are we to do?

For starters, a functional Regional Innovation Forum – albeit slowed down due to funding issues – which brings

together many innovation stakeholders across the region.

The establishment of an incubator, Propella, which is going from strength to strength, and the creation of the Mandela Bay Composites Cluster, among other things.

These will all add to an innovation ecosystem that we need to keep developing.

For the first time I really see these as necessary parts of a whole and not as disparate initiatives.

We need to go further – develop more businesses that can absorb technologies, find sources of funding to support businesses, find entrepreneurs that can drive these businesses into global enterprises based in the Eastern Cape.

Nelson Mandela Bay has some brilliant examples of innovation businesses that have flourished in spite of the lack of an ecosystem. We need to make it easier for more to develop, survive and grow.

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