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The 6th World Sustainability Forum [#WSF2017SA](#): African universities critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

Jeffrey and Sonia Sachs win first *World Sustainability Award*.

Universities need to take the lead in solving the greatest challenges the world faces today, particularly in Africa. They need to do this not only through education – teaching the next generation to think critically and creatively to find sustainable solutions – but also through research that cuts across a range of disciplines. To ensure these solutions are implemented, they need to partner with the private sector and with government.

This was the key message from the [6th World Sustainability Forum](#) (WSF2017), which took place in Cape Town on 27 and 28 January 2017. Sponsored by [MDPI](#) and the journal [Sustainability](#) under the patronage of the Universities of the [Western Cape](#) (UWC), [Cape Town](#) (UCT), [University of Basel](#) and the [National Research Foundation](#) (NRF) of South Africa, the conference was attended by key national and international speakers, including world-leading economist Professor [Jeffrey D. Sachs](#), senior United Nations (UN) advisor and director of the [Earth Institute](#) at [Columbia University](#).

The *WSF* is an annual sustainability conference which addresses research in a range of areas related to sustainable development and sustainability globally. This was the first *WSF* to take place on the African continent. Discussions at the 2017 conference were driven by the 17 [sustainable development goals \(SDGs\)](#) adopted as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by the UN in September 2015.

Achieving the SDGs *“is the moonshot for our generation,”* said Sachs. *“Like the moonshot [moon landing] of the 1960s, these are tough, bold and achievable objectives.”*

“This is a nasty, tough world we live in, and our world agrees on very little. So when 193 governments agree on something, that is important. And when they agree on something as important as sustainable development, that is really something for us to grab hold of – that is a lifeline.”

There was agreement at the *WSF* that the SDGs are particularly important for Africa, and that African universities in particular have a role to play in achieving them.

Said Professor Tyrone Pretorius, vice-chancellor of UWC: *“The quest for sustainable development can only be met through education. Universities today are the oil that fuels the knowledge economy.”*

As part of the drive to develop academic capacity to provide the knowledge needed to meet the SDGs, *WSF2017* was preceded by the [1st Postgraduate Forum on Sustainability](#). *“A series of workshops for postgraduate education linked to *WSF* are important, in order to equip postgraduates with the skills necessary to promote sustainability,”* said Professor Thandi Mgwebi, director for research at UWC. A second postgraduate forum will take place alongside the *WSF2018* in Beijing.

This capacity development is particularly critical to Africa. Said Sachs: *“African universities need to do research to find solutions to Africa’s development challenges, because no other university will.”*



The UN set a target of achieving the SDGs by 2030: *“I regard this as the breakthrough period to end extreme poverty on the continent,”* said Sachs, *“and for Africa to become one of the most dynamic centres of the world economy.”*

It is a critical time for South African universities, said Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng, deputy vice-chancellor for research and internationalisation at UCT: *“Higher education is at a crossroads, and there is much polarisation. We need to think carefully about how this sustainable development agenda is owned by all so that it is inclusionary.”*

There was also strong emphasis on public–private partnerships – for universities, business and government to work together to achieve the goals.

Said Professor Francis Petersen, deputy vice-chancellor at UCT and vice-chancellor designate at the [University of the Free State](#): *“Business sustainability has become critical, because there is increasing demand and complexity of demand on business from the natural, social and economic environment. Sustainability cannot be a standalone issue, divorced from business as usual. Sustainability needs to be embedded into business.”*

Environmental crises and climate change was also high on the WSF agenda. In his keynote address, Sachs noted the irreversibility of the climate- and environmental-related challenges. *“If we don’t get our act together, we lose the chance of safety,”* he said.

Said Professor Mark New, pro vice-chancellor and director of the [African Climate and Development Initiative](#) at UCT: *“We have a fundamental challenge in responding to climate change, and we must go further than just putting a plaster on a wound. We need to address the deep structural issues, to move from our current model of development into climate-compatible development.”*

“This requires researchers to find the evidence for the correct development pathways to take, and then support the ability of policymakers at all levels to enable the shift to climate-compatible development planning.”

Said Dr. Aldo Stroebe, executive director of international relations and cooperation at the NRF, in closing: *“We have seen over the past two days an urgency towards the next step of thinking, that critical type of framework that we all must engage with, not only from an academic perspective, but further up into the policy environment and into rural-based environments where one can clearly see the links and effectiveness of the work.”*

World Sustainability Awards

The first *World Sustainability Award* and the first *Emerging Sustainability Leader Awards* were presented by Prof. Thandi Mgwebi, Director of Research at UWC, and Dr. Franck Vazquez, CEO of MDPI, during the ceremony on 27 January 2017 as part of the gala dinner of the *6th World Sustainability Forum* in South Africa after day one of proceedings of the *2017 World Sustainability Forum South Africa*.

Professor [Jeffrey D. Sachs](#) and Dr. [Sonia Ehrlich Sachs](#) are the joint recipients of the first [World Sustainability Award](#). Jeffrey Sachs is a world-renowned economist and senior United Nations (UN) advisor and director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University. Sonia Sachs is a paediatrician and



public health specialist, and director of the Health Centre at the Centre for Sustainable Development, also at Columbia University.

The joint recipients of the first *Emerging Sustainability Leader Award* are Dr. Esther Ngumbi and Dr. Xiaosong Hu. Esther Ngumbi is a postdoctoral researcher at [Auburn University](#) in Alabama USA and serves as a 2015 Clinton Global University Mentor for agriculture. Xiaosong Hu is a professor at the [Chongqing University](#) in China and specialises in automotive control systems and mechanical engineering.

The *World Sustainability Award* and the *Emerging Sustainability Leader Awards* are funded to encourage new initiatives and developments in sustainability with the ultimate aim of fostering the transition to sustainable practices and societies.

The *World Sustainability Award* is funded by the [MDPI Sustainability Foundation](#), and included a monetary prize of USD 100,000 to Jeffrey and Sonia Sachs. The *Emerging Sustainability Leader Award* is funded by the journal [Sustainability](#), awarded to researchers under 40, and included a monetary prize of USD10,000.

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Conference photos are free available at: <http://sciforum.net/conference/wsf-6/page/175>

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