NITheP Colloquium
Monday, 17 May 2021, 16h00

Prof Nithaya Chetty | University of the Witwatersrand

"Aim for the Sky, But Keep Your Feet on the Ground"

This talk is based on a recent invited commentary for the American Physical Society Physics Magazine (see https://physics.aps.org/articles/v14/52). An all-too-common view is that for the foreseeable future, African countries should focus their efforts almost exclusively on education, rather than on research. The argument is that if we get the fundamentals right, we will eventually produce a critical mass of quality graduates who will go on to make important contributions to society. And when it comes to driving innovation, governments in the developing world, with their limited resources, are expected to invest mostly in applied research, with the scientific agenda set primarily by the quest to find solutions to the practical problems facing their populations.

It is obviously important that African countries prioritize education and support applied research, but not exclusively. I argue that it would be a grave mistake to do that in the absence of an excellent fundamental research agenda. Unless African countries aim for the highest levels of scientific research excellence within a milieu of unfettered inquiry, the continent will continue to languish on the treadmill of poverty and inequality. By striving for open-ended, curiosity-driven research, we will be better placed to harness the benefits of education and to stimulate innovation. While being attentive to our problems on the ground, we must aim for the sky. (Picture: Chetty speaking at the opening of the HESS-II telescope in Namibia in September 2012).

BIOGRAPHY

Nithaya Chetty is Dean of Science at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. He is a former president of the South African Institute of Physics. He served as Deputy Chief Executive Officer of the South African National Research Foundation with responsibility for astronomy during the building phase of MeerKAT, the precursor of the Square Kilometre Array radio telescope. He is currently Vice-President of the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics (IUPAP), with responsibility for membership matters. He is a two-time recipient of Fulbright fellowships, which allowed him to study and carry out research in the USA.

CLICK TO REGISTER

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

Contact our Communications Officer: T: +27 (0)87 702 9364 | E: rene.kotze@nithep.ac.za