Researchers explore why scientists agree to participate at SA's biggest science festival, Scifest Africa.

Science festivals are becoming increasingly popular in South Africa as meeting places where the public can talk to scientists about their research, as well as enjoy various science-related shows such as science talks or interactive displays. Given that scientists are key actors in representing science at these public events and their participation is voluntary, understanding what motivates or deters their participation at these public events is important in order to advance science engagement strategies in South Africa.

Researchers from the Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) at Stellenbosch University and the University of Warwick explored the reasons and country-specific factors that motivate or deter scientists to participate in public engagements events. Using an online self-administered survey completed by 40 scientists who participated in South Africa's biggest science festival, Scifest Africa in 2019, the study (published in 2021) revealed that:

Goals and motivators to participate

Scientists were willing to participate in public engagement events and were driven by different goals, such as:

- The idea of promoting and representing their research institutions.
- Finding pleasure in engaging with the public about science.
- Desire to increase public interest in science and public appreciation of scientist's work.
- Perceiving a moral duty to engage with the public.
- Opportunity to network with other scientists.

Furthermore, objectives such as informing and inspiring the public, strengthening public trust in science, correcting misinformation about science and inspiring young people about science careers emerged as strong motivators for scientists to participate in Scifest Africa. The scientists were also fuelled by moral responsibility to make a difference, as well as to engage with students from disadvantaged groups to inspire and attract them to future careers in science.

The study also highlights that Black African scientists regarded participation at science events an important opportunity to be able to talk to the public in their own language, to be positive role models for the next generation, as well as to help tackle the apartheid legacy of inequality which has perpetuated limited access to science information, education, and representation of female and Black African scientists in the scientific workforce.

GALLO/GETTY IMAGES

> Scientists fuelled by moral responsibility to make a difference.

Potential barriers to participate

Noting that all the scientists in the study participated in Scifest Africa, the researchers also sought to identify potential barriers that could deter their future participation. Time and funding constraints emerged high on the list of potential barriers. Most of the scientists were concerned about the time commitment required to travel to and engage effectively in such events. Uncertainty about effective engagement with the public was also noted as an area of concern. The researchers suggest this could be linked to a lack of recognition and support for public engagement by institutions, as well as a lack of training opportunities to provide scientists with effective public dialogue skills.

Given that science festivals are set to grow in numbers and size as an effective means of science communication and public engagement, the study highlights that key stakeholders such as universities, research institutions and science engagement entities should build expertise and provide continuous support to improve the scientists' participation. SM

Factors that Motivate or Deter Scientists to **PARTICIPATE IN SCIENCE FESTIVALS**