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UCT launches the world's first synthesis centre on climate change



The world's first synthesis centre focused on climate change, hosted at UCT, will accelerate the nature and pace of climate change action. It is directed by UCT scholar Dr Christopher Trisos. Photo Michelle Shields

The international launch of the [African Synthesis Centre for Climate Change, Environment and Development \(ASCEND\)](#) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) is set to accelerate the pace and nature of climate change action across Africa and globally.

Launched on 1 November, ASCEND will provide a specialised infrastructure for teams of researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners to harness and integrate diverse data and

knowledge on climate change to accelerate discoveries and enhance equitable and effective action on climate change and development.

The new centre will be hosted at UCT's African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI) and represents a first for the continent. It is also the world's first synthesis centre focusing on climate change and development and will be underpinned by a strong focus on the Global South.

In an era of rapid climate change, research knowledge and data on climate change impacts and solutions have burgeoned worldwide, said ASCEND director, Dr Christopher Trisos.

"We often think of sophisticated equipment like a radio telescope or a biotech laboratory as essential for scientific discovery, but in this age of complex social and environmental challenges –such as climate change – another form of research infrastructure is now essential too: synthesis centres."

As a synthesis centre, ASCEND will provide a platform for transdisciplinary teams of policy-makers, researchers and practitioners to synthesise and leverage existing data and knowledge for climate change solutions. The aim is to generate actionable research that will advance climate-resilient development, the core of which is the well-being of people and ecosystems.

"The 2020s are a critical decade for climate action," Trisos said at the launch, attended by high-level researchers, government representatives, and funders from Africa and abroad.

"Decision-makers, practitioners, and researchers must address complex problems that cut across disciplines, geographies, and socioeconomic divides to enable the transformative change necessary to secure a sustainable future for all."

He added, "Climate change, biodiversity loss, and poverty are interlinked problems that no single discipline can solve. A lack of data and knowledge synthesis limits breakthrough research and decision-making."

Accelerate African solutions

The centre will welcome synthesis teams in 2024, when work begins on the BAOBAB synthesis project for African research on climate change. This will bring together climate change data, researchers, and decision-makers across the continent and nurture African scholars and scholarship.

At the launch, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research and Internationalisation Professor Sue Harrison said the development is timely in a data-rich, data-driven world.

“UCT is proud to be part of the initiative. We need this kind of infrastructure, the collaborative teamwork spaces where we can get to grips with big data and diverse knowledge in a way that is demand-driven and in a more equitable and deliberately designed teamwork environment.”

Harrison added, “And the importance of a centre based in Africa and the Global South allows us to talk very specifically to the needs of this part of our world. Everything we talk about at UCT for our Vision 2030 concerns how we make a real difference, and actionable research is integral to this.”

The centre has been seven years in the making and was brought to fruition thanks to funding and support from various international bodies, which recognised the strengths and cost efficiency of transdisciplinary teams.

BAOBAB synthesis project

Participants of ASCEND synthesis teams will consist of up to 15 members who will meet at the UCT-hosted base up to four times over two years, with work continuing between meetings.

BAOBAB will fund up to six African-led synthesis teams over the next three years, and each team will have a postdoctoral research fellow based at UCT.

The leaders and other members of teams can be located anywhere in Africa, and they can be from policy, research, or practitioner backgrounds.

Calls for teams on a particular theme will be advertised soon, and notices will be posted on the ASCEND website and in their newsletter.

“ASCEND will only be as strong and effective as the teams we can attract and support at the centre,” said Trisos.

Story by Helen Swingler, UCT News

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