

## OPINION

# Saving dreams, shaping futures: my reflections of 5 years of the African Science Frontiers Initiatives

**BRIGHT I. NWARU**

### **AFFILIATIONS:**

African Science Frontiers  
Initiatives

Institute of Medicine, University of  
Gothenburg, Sweden

### **CORRESPONDENCE:**

Bright Nwaru  
African Science Frontiers  
Initiatives  
bright.nwaru@gmail.com

### **ABSTRACT**

**The African Science Frontiers Initiatives (ASFI)** was born from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic's disruption, transforming a period of global silence into a movement of resilience. Founded on the conviction that Africa must be a producer, not just a consumer, of global knowledge, ASFI emerged to address systemic barriers faced by scientists on the continent: inadequate mentorship, low visibility, and limited collaboration opportunities.

What began as a single free online training course attracted an overwhelming response, revealing a pent-up demand for Pan-African scientific community and support. Driven by this need, ASFI grew organically into a robust ecosystem. Within five years, it trained nearly 5,000 scientists from over 45 African countries through diverse programs, including mentorship schemes, digital conferences, and a collaborative online platform, ASFIScholar.

Beyond numbers, ASFI's profound impact is human. It offers hope and dignity, exemplified by welcoming over 500 researchers displaced by the Sudanese war. The initiative fosters leadership with integrity, aiming to nurture scientists with truth and honor who can drive Africa's renewal and development.

Despite challenges, such as funding constraints and overwhelming demand, the community's solidarity and participants' success stories fuel its resilience. ASFI is more than an organization; it is a movement built by Africans, for Africans, proving that a shared vision can transform strangers into a family dedicated to rewriting Africa's scientific future.

### **KEYWORDS:**

Africa, African Science Frontiers Initiatives, COVID-19, research, resilience, science, transformation, unity

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## When Silence Spoke: The Birth of ASFI

When I close my eyes and think back to the year 2020, I remember the silence first. The silence of empty streets, the silence of closed airports, the silence of uncertainty. The world was at a standstill, and yet in that silence, something else was stirring. Beneath the grief of lost lives, beneath the anxiety of shuttered borders, beneath the heavy cloak of confusion, there was also a whisper of resilience. In the very heart of disruption, a seed of hope was planted. That seed, fragile yet determined, would grow into what we now know as the **African Science Frontiers Initiatives - ASFI**.

ASFI was not conceived in a boardroom, drafted in a glossy proposal, or powered by a vast budget. It was not the outcome of committees, consultants, or carefully polished strategies. No - it was born in crisis, forged in urgency, and carried forward by conviction. Conviction that Africa must not remain on the margins of global science. Conviction that our continent must not only consume knowledge generated elsewhere but also stand tall as a producer of knowledge - knowledge rooted in our realities, shaped by our challenges, and directed toward our futures.

It was conviction that our scientists deserve more than invisibility in the global arena. They deserve mentorship to guide their growth, training to sharpen their skills, platforms to amplify their voices, and above all, dignity in their pursuit of truth.

It was conviction that the time for waiting, for hoping someone else would step in, had passed. The time for action had come. Out of pain, yes. Out of disruption, yes. But also, out of a deep belief that crisis does not only destroy - it also creates. In the ashes of stillness, ASFI was born as a movement of unity, of courage, and of faith in Africa's capacity to rise.

## A Dream Long in the Making

For many years, I had carried within the crucible of my womb a dream: the vision of a Pan-African platform, a space where scientists could connect across borders, collaborate across disciplines, and grow together. I knew the gaps intimately: the near absence of structured mentorship, the barriers to publishing, the weak infrastructure, the low visibility of African

scholarship. These were not abstract challenges - they were lived realities for colleagues, friends, and aspiring scientists across the continent.

I was privileged to have built a career in Europe. I had access to international platforms, high-impact journals, and state-of-the-art laboratories - opportunities that many of my peers in Africa could only dream of. Yet these privileges never sat lightly with me. Every success I celebrated came with the sobering reminder of others left behind. Every opportunity I seized underscored the absence of opportunities for others.

I often asked myself: What does it mean for me to thrive while my continent struggles? What is the value of my success if it does not translate into hope for others?

These questions kept resurfacing whenever I encountered young African researchers brimming with potential but locked out of opportunities. I saw bright students unable to publish because they lacked mentorship in research design and scientific writing. I met early-career scientists struggling with imposter syndrome because they had never been given the chance to present at a major conference. I listened to peers whose projects were abandoned midstream for lack of funding, guidance, or access to collaborations.

It was these stories - personal, painful, urgent - that gave birth to ASFI. From the very beginning, ASFI was never just an organization. It was a movement. A family. A calling. Its founding philosophy was simple yet revolutionary: **Africa must be a producer of knowledge and not just a consumer of it.**

## Lighting the Spark: The Seed Takes Root

In early 2020, as the world reeled from the COVID-19 pandemic, I sent out an invitation to colleagues across Africa to join a free online training on systematic reviews and meta-analysis - the very first ASFI course. I wasn't sure what to expect. Would anyone be interested? Would anyone even show up?

The response was overwhelming. More than 100 people applied, and just under 50 were admitted, representing 20 African countries. That first course soon became the

most popular of all ASFI programs. Encouraged by the enthusiasm, we introduced additional courses. Within the very first year, each course attracted between 1,500 and 2,500 applications from over 45 countries across Africa.

Participants themselves best captured the spirit of those early days. Their words reveal both the transformative impact of ASFI and the passion it ignited across the continent:

One participant observed:

*“You cannot sit in ASFI programs and leave the same. There is a fire lighted in you to do more and be better than you came in.”*

Another reflected on ASFI’s unique value:

*“ASFI is truly phenomenal in bringing change to the capacities of African scientists. Its impact is beyond comparison with any other intervention.”*

A third captured the passion that drew them in:

*“Actions speak louder than words, they say. A student colleague of mine, through whom I got to know about ASFI, always spoke of the organization with such passion. That stirred my curiosity. With what I have learnt so far, I now understand the passion.”*

And another affirmed the depth of ASFI’s training:

*“The ASFI course on reproducibility in scientific research is unique. It promotes value above records and virtues above figures. It connects the conscience and the pen of the researcher as they report findings to the larger world.”*

The demand was undeniable, and with it came a wave of solidarity that was both humbling and inspiring. Participants showed not only a hunger for knowledge but also a remarkable willingness to uplift one another - sharing resources, encouraging peers, and breaking through barriers of geography, religion, and discipline. In those moments, it became clear that ASFI was not merely a good idea or a passing experiment. It was the birth of something far greater - a movement whose time had truly come. A movement built not on external prescriptions, but on the collective will of Africans themselves. It was a movement of Africans, for

Africans, and by Africans, grounded in unity, vision, and the belief that together, transformation is possible.

## **From Seeds to an Ecosystem**

From those small beginnings, ASFI experienced uninterrupted growth. Within five years, we had trained almost 5,000 African scientists across a wide range of research capacity-building programs, reaching over 45 countries.

Our **Science Seminar Series**, launched in 2021, has run non-stop every month since. These seminars have become spaces not only for sharing knowledge but also for elevating the role of science and research in Africa’s broader development agenda.

From 2022, we introduced **monthly and bi-monthly career-focused workshops**, offering targeted support to the African science community. These workshops nurtured talent, inspired growth, and gave young scientists the confidence to pursue ambitious goals.

The **ASFI Members’ General Assembly**, inaugurated in 2023, provided members with a sense of belonging and ownership. Around the same time, we launched the **Matched-Mentoring Program**, creating a platform for mentorship across disciplines and borders. And in 2024, the members-led **ASFI Tea Time** workshop began - an informal yet powerful space to engage in candid discussions on research, productivity, and well-being.

We also saw the rise of larger-scale engagements. The **ASFI Multidisciplinary Digital Conference and Boot Camp**, inaugurated in 2023, gave scientists—both young and seasoned—the chance to tell their research stories, showcase their work, and learn from others.

That same year, we built **ASFIScholar** (<https://asfischolar.org/>), a collaborative digital platform for African scholars at home and in the diaspora. **ASFIScholar** has grown into a vibrant community space for learning, mentoring, and collaboration. Its sister platform, **ASFIMeet** (<https://asfischolar.net/>), provides a free video conferencing and electronic poster-viewing facility, enabling African scientists to connect virtually and hold professional conferences without barriers.

And in 2024, we established the **ASFI Research Journal** (<https://asfirj.org/>), an open-access multidisciplinary publishing platform designed to amplify African scholarship while also serving as a training ground for peer review and scientific communication.

Step by step, initiative by initiative, ASFI evolved from a single training program into a robust ecosystem of knowledge, mentorship, collaboration, and community.

# ASFI MILESTONES AT A GLANCE

Celebrating five years of  
empowering African scientists  
with skills and opportunities.



## The Stories and Voices that Fuel Our Fire

Beyond the platforms we have built, the milestones we have celebrated, and the growth in numbers, what moves me most are the people - their courage, their resilience, and their stories. I am inspired by their determination to thrive in the face of adversity, their refusal to be defined by limitations, and their commitment to rewrite their own career narratives. I see their drive to lift one another up, to unite across borders, and to channel their knowledge toward real impact - not only in their own lives, but in their communities, their nations, and the future of Africa itself.

In 2024, war displaced hundreds of Sudanese scientists. Many lost their homes, laboratories, and offices - some even lost colleagues. At ASFI, we opened our doors to them. More than 500 displaced Sudanese researchers joined our programs.

I will never forget one email I received from a young Sudanese researcher. She wrote:  
*“ASFI gave me hope when I thought my career was over.”*

Another participant captured the experience in words I often carry with me:  
*“As always, ASFI’s courses leave a mark on me. I will always cherish the way they do things.”*

Amid the turmoil of war and the pain of exile, a Sudanese professor found her way to ASFI. In the face of displacement and loss, she discovered in this community not just science, but solace. With emotion, she captured her journey in a single phrase: *“a journey of healing for a woman scientist.”*

These voices remind me each day: ASFI is not only about training scientists. **It is about saving dreams. It is the shaping of futures** yet unseen. The African future. Our collective future.

Today, more than 10,000 scientists are connected through ASFI’s mailing list - a vast community that spans nations, disciplines, and cultures. Remarkably, I have met fewer than five of them in person. Imagine that! And yet, whenever we gather online, it feels as though we have known each other for years. There is an

ease, a familiarity, born not of proximity but of purpose. That is the power of a shared vision. That is the magic of solidarity. It is the spirit of ASFI in action, transforming strangers into colleagues, colleagues into friends, and friends into something deeper: **it is a family.**

## Challenges and Resilience

Of course, the journey has not been without challenges. There were seasons when the weight of responsibility pressed heavily, when I felt stretched thin between personal commitments and the relentless demands of this cause. There were moments of exhaustion, nights when sleep eluded me as I lay awake wrestling with questions that refused to rest. How could such a vision endure without sustainable funding? Could this fragile flame, kindled in crisis, withstand the winds of uncertainty? Again and again, I asked myself: *Can ASFI survive? Will this dream fade - or will it find the strength to burn brighter still?*

But in every season of self-doubt, something extraordinary always seemed to happen. Just when discouragement whispered loudest, a message would arrive from a participant - sometimes a word of encouragement, sometimes a prayer, sometimes a simple note asking how my day had been. Other times it was news of success: a paper published, a grant won, a new collaboration formed. I will never forget the scientist who said, “Because of ASFI, I believe in myself again.” Those words carried me through long nights. They reminded me that this movement is not about me, nor any single person, it is bigger than me - it is about a continent’s future, about tomorrow’s generations, and even generations yet unborn, whose possibilities are being written today.

There were also practical challenges - persistent struggles with lack of funding, unreliable technology, and the overwhelming scale of demand. Many times, the number of applicants far exceeded the spaces we could offer, and turning people away was never easy. Each rejection weighed heavily, a reminder of the vast need that remained unmet. Yet even in these struggles, resilience shone through. Participants stepped in where resources fell short, supporting one another, forming peer groups, and sharing materials. In doing so, they created a ripple effect of knowledge and

encouragement that spread far beyond ASFI's direct programs, magnifying our collective impact.

ASFI has also transformed me in ways I could never have imagined. It has been one of my greatest teachers, shaping my resilience, deepening my patience, and humbling me in the face of the courage I see in others. Through this journey, I have witnessed the boundless potential of unity and the extraordinary things that happen when people come together with a shared vision. Each passing day strengthens my conviction in a bright future for African science and for Africa itself. I am filled with joy at how much we can accomplish, and how many challenges we can overcome, once united.

### **Beyond Competence: Building Leadership with Integrity**

What gives me the greatest pride is not merely that ASFI is shaping competent scientists, but that it is nurturing ethical leaders - leaders with integrity, character, values, and unwavering commitment. Competence without integrity is fragile, but competence anchored in ethics becomes transformative. I believe Africa's true renewal will not come from skills alone, but from scientists who embody honesty, responsibility, humility, hope, and the fear of God. These are the qualities that inspire trust, unite communities, and sustain progress across generations. This is the system we are consciously building - a culture where knowledge serves people and principles guide ambition. And this, I am convinced, is the legacy that will outlive us all. This is **the spirit of ASFI in action**.

### **From Little Beginnings to Giant Steps**

A journey of a thousand miles always begins with a single step, and for us, that defining step was taken in 2020. It was a bold stride into the unknown, born out of conviction and courage. What started as one small step quickly multiplied, and in just five years, those footsteps have become giant leaps. Leaps toward empowerment, where African scientists discover their voices; leaps toward dignity, where their work is valued and visible; leaps toward fulfilment, where dreams are revived. Above all, these are leaps toward a brighter, stronger, and more self-reliant future for Africa.

The solidarity we have received from across Africa - cutting across countries, disciplines, generations, and even religions - tells me something deeply powerful: this is not just an initiative, it is a movement whose time has truly come. It signals that African scientists, long constrained by limited resources and systemic barriers, have been waiting for this moment of recognition and empowerment. They have been yearning for a platform to shape their own futures, to generate solutions rooted in their realities, and to uplift their communities with pride, confidence, and the knowledge that their voices genuinely matter.

As one participant said:

*"ASFI courses are like a spiritual journey for me at the end of which I have emerged purged and strengthened."*

These words echo the lived reality of thousands whose careers, dreams, and futures are being reshaped.

We have witnessed countless testimonials of impact and transformation: expanded research foundations that strengthen scholarship, essential skills developed that empower scientists to thrive, and new collaborations forged that link scientists and communities across the continent. We have seen attitudes shift, confidence grow, and, above all, an awakened and united sense of Africanness - an identity that inspires pride, resilience, and a shared commitment to shaping Africa's scientific future.

As I often say, ASFI is far more than a program or an organization - it is a movement with a mission. A mission with a clear and unwavering target: to build an Africa that no longer stands on the margins of knowledge, but at its centre. A target that envisions a continent we can all be proud of, strong in science, rich in innovation, and united in purpose.

### **Looking Ahead**

And so, I stand today with hope - not a naïve or fragile hope, but a tested and refined one. It is hope born in the crucible of long nights, repeated struggles, and painful setbacks, yet also strengthened by victories, resilience, and the unshakable solidarity of a community that refused to give up. I believe, with every fibre of conviction, that a century from now posterity will look

back on this movement with gratitude. They will remember that in 2020, amid a global crisis, African scientists chose unity. They chose empowerment. They chose courage. Above all, they chose to believe their story could be different, and in doing so, they began to write a new future for Africa – **it is the ASFI story.**

The future of ASFI lies not just in sustaining what we have built, but in daring to dream bigger. I envision ASFI establishing regional research hubs that provide physical spaces for innovation. I see us expanding our journal into one of the leading open-access platforms for global South scholarship. I dream of scholarships that will take African scientists to global institutions while keeping their feet firmly rooted in service to the continent.

But more than the platforms, programs, or structures we have built, I see ASFI's true future written in people. It is in the young student who discovers, perhaps for the very first time, a passion for research through one of our courses. It is in the mid-career scholar who, after years of setbacks and discouragement, regains confidence and dares to dream again. It is in the senior scientist who rediscovers joy and purpose by mentoring the next generation. These lives, rekindled and redirected, are the real legacy. They are the seeds of transformation, destined to bear fruit long after we are gone.

### **My ASFI 5-Year Story: Where Hope Becomes Legacy**

For me, this will always be more than just an initiative — it is a defining chapter of my life's purpose. It is one of the most meaningful stories I will ever tell: **my ASFI story.** A journey of courage and impact. A journey of service and fulfilment. A journey that proves when vision meets resilience, transformation is not only possible — it is inevitable. It is a journey that reflects **the ASFI spirit in action.**

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am deeply grateful to all the men and women who have joined hands to make the ASFI story a reality. That we can tell this five-year story with such confidence is a

testament to your resilience, support, and hard work. For that, I say thank you.

Within the ASFI management, I owe special gratitude to **Dr. Eman Sobh** and **Dr. Ajibola Oladejo**, whose unwavering support has carried us through every step of this journey. With little or no reward, you have remained steadfast, believing in this dream and keeping the cause alive. Thank you.

I also wish to recognize **Mrs. Lizzy Onyenweaku, Mr. Edward Onyenweaku, and Ms. Jane Loveday** for their invaluable administrative support throughout these years. Your diligence and dedication behind the scenes have been indispensable. Thank you.

To the members and leaders of the **ASFI General Assembly**, represented by past and current presidents, **Dr. Eunice Fondze-Fombele** and **Dr. Dumisani Hompashe**, I extend my heartfelt thanks. Your leadership and encouragement have been pillars of strength for our community. Thank you.

Over these five years, our programs have brought together countless African sons and daughters, home and in the diaspora, who have come and inspired, enlightened, and uplifted us. Many joined despite the inconvenience of time and distance, yet they chose to stand with us. Words cannot fully capture my gratitude for your sacrifices. Thank you.

Finally, to all who have believed in this cause, embraced the ASFI family with open arms, encouraged us, and prayed for us - I am profoundly thankful. You are the heartbeat of this journey. I am confident that when the history of this generation is written - of how Africa rose and pushed its limits into the limelight - your names will not be forgotten.

Thank you all, for these five remarkable years.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

None declare