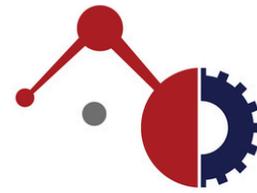


# MKRI MONTHLY

January 2026 Issue



**Moses Kotane  
Research Institute**

Research · Innovation · Excellence



**WELCOME TO THE NEW  
MKRI BOARD**  
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## Top News

- Innovation and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Conference
- MKRI Richmond Digital Centre – Oversight Visit
- MSME Post G20 Debriefing Dialogue

## "The knowledge hub for economic growth in KZN"

This newsletter highlights the key events and strategic engagements undertaken by the Moses Kotane Research Institute (MKRI) during January 2026.

The activities align with the institute's mission of advancing research-driven solutions, skills development, digital innovation, and socio-economic empowerment in KwaZulu-Natal.



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# INNOVATION & INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS CONFERENCE 2026

The 2026 Innovation and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) Conference marked a significant milestone in advancing Indigenous Knowledge as a central pillar of innovation and economic development in KwaZulu-Natal. More than a forum for dialogue, the Conference became a structured platform for commitment, accountability, and coordinated action. At the centre of this turning point stood the Moses Kotane Research Institute (MKRI), which played a leading role in shaping discussions, aligning stakeholders, and translating shared aspirations into a practical roadmap.

Held under the theme “Indigenous Wisdom, Modern Solutions,” the Conference reinforced a principle long championed by MKRI: Indigenous Knowledge Systems are not peripheral to innovation, but foundational to it. Over the years, MKRI has established itself as a thought leader in integrating IKS into provincial development frameworks through research, policy engagement, and community collaboration. The Conference reflected the culmination of sustained groundwork laid by the Institute in positioning indigenous knowledge as both a cultural asset and an economic strategy.

In his keynote address, the MEC for Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs (EDTEA), Hon. Rev. Musa Zondi, emphasised the urgency of stimulating economic growth in a province facing high unemployment and slow economic performance. MKRI’s mandate aligns directly with this objective. The Institute has consistently argued that unlocking indigenous knowledge presents a viable pathway for inclusive economic transformation, particularly in a province rich in cultural heritage, ancestral wisdom, and community-based practices.

MKRI understands that innovation must be contextually grounded. Through research programmes, policy dialogues, and community engagement platforms, the Institute has built bridges between indigenous knowledge holders and the formal innovation ecosystem. This approach ensures that economic transformation is rooted in lived realities and local strengths rather than externally imposed models.

A defining feature of the Conference was its outcome-driven orientation. MKRI played a central role in facilitating structured discussions and synthesising diverse stakeholder inputs into clear, implementable resolutions. These were formally presented by Ms Zama Dlamini, Acting Executive Manager for the Development Unit, and included clearly assigned responsibilities and a...

commitment to review progress at the next Conference. This shift from event-based engagement to sustained implementation reflects MKRI’s institutional philosophy: convening must lead to consolidation, monitoring, and measurable progress.

One of the Conference’s key resolutions was the formal recognition of Indigenous Knowledge as a legitimate and dynamic form of innovation. MKRI has consistently demonstrated through research and policy advocacy that indigenous agricultural methods, traditional medicinal knowledge, ecological management systems, and community technologies represent adaptive innovation refined over generations. These systems are structured and sophisticated, deserving institutional support and integration into mainstream development strategies.

The protection of indigenous intellectual property (IP) also emerged as a critical priority. MKRI has been instrumental in raising awareness about gaps in legal protection and the vulnerability of communities to misappropriation. The Conference resolutions called for strengthened legal frameworks, improved community awareness, clear benefit-sharing agreements, and coordinated institutional support. Through its bridging role between communities, policymakers, and legal experts, MKRI has elevated IP protection to a central component of the provincial innovation agenda.

Community co-creation and inclusive innovation remain at the heart of MKRI’s approach. The Institute emphasises that innovation must be developed with communities, not extracted from them. By engaging traditional leaders, healers, farmers, artisans, and youth innovators as equal partners, MKRI ensures that knowledge custodians are active contributors and beneficiaries in the innovation value chain.



# INNOVATION & INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS CONFERENCE 2026

This participatory model strengthens both legitimacy and long-term impact. Beyond recognition and protection, MKRI has advanced the integration of IKS into commercial value chains.

Through research mapping and stakeholder coordination, the Institute has identified economic opportunities in natural health products, indigenous crops, agro-processing, cultural tourism, and craft innovation. By aligning Conference resolutions with practical commercial pathways and existing funding mechanisms, MKRI has helped position indigenous knowledge as a driver of tangible economic participation.

Strengthening the provincial innovation ecosystem was another recurring theme. Fragmentation across institutions and sectors has often limited impact. MKRI has proactively addressed this challenge by positioning itself as a convening hub, fostering structured collaboration among government departments, research institutions, industry players, and community representatives. This coordination reduces duplication, aligns initiatives, and promotes coherence within the broader provincial development framework.

Skills development and knowledge transfer were also prioritised. MKRI recognises that preserving Indigenous Knowledge requires intentional intergenerational exchange. Through youth engagement in IKS research, documentation initiatives, capacity-building workshops, and partnerships between universities and traditional practitioners, the Institute promotes both preservation and modern capability development. Sustainable innovation depends on safeguarding traditional knowledge while equipping new generations with the skills to refine and expand it.

The Conference further emphasised the importance of bridging science, technology, and Indigenous Knowledge.



MKRI plays a mediating role in fostering respectful collaboration between academic researchers and knowledge custodians. This ensures that integration is evidence-informed while maintaining the integrity of traditional systems. Such interdisciplinary engagement promotes mutual benefit and balanced innovation. IKS was also aligned with pressing development priorities, including food security, health, and environmental sustainability. Indigenous farming practices enhance climate resilience, traditional medicinal knowledge supports primary healthcare, and ecological stewardship contributes to sustainable development. MKRI's research consistently highlights these practical applications, reinforcing that indigenous knowledge is not symbolic but solution-oriented.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the Conference was the commitment to accountability. By embedding monitoring, evaluation, and progress review mechanisms into the resolutions, MKRI ensured that commitments extend beyond aspirational statements. The agreement to assess progress at the next Conference institutionalises follow-through and continuous learning.

The emphasis on continuity underscores MKRI's long-term vision. Transformation requires sustained platforms for dialogue, coordination, and renewal. By anchoring the Conference within an ongoing process, MKRI has established a mechanism to track progress, refine strategies, and respond to emerging challenges.

Ultimately, the 2026 Innovation and Indigenous Knowledge Systems Conference reaffirmed MKRI's role as a catalyst for inclusive innovation in KwaZulu-Natal. By structuring dialogue, aligning stakeholders, advancing policy recognition, strengthening intellectual property protection, promoting commercial integration, and embedding accountability, the Institute has positioned Indigenous Knowledge Systems as a vital engine for economic growth and sustainable development.

As the province confronts unemployment and economic stagnation, MKRI's work demonstrates that indigenous wisdom and modern innovation are not opposing forces but complementary drivers of transformation. The true measure of success will be evident at the next Conference, where progress will be reviewed and partnerships strengthened. Until then, MKRI remains steadfast in advancing Indigenous Knowledge Systems as a foundation for inclusive growth, dignity, and resilience in KwaZulu-Natal.



## uMkhosi wase-Sandlwana:

### The Battle of Isandlwana Commemoration



MKRI participated in uMkhosi wase-Sandlwana, the Battle of Isandlwana Commemoration, held in Nquthu within the uMzinyathi District. The event marked the 147th anniversary of this historic battle, commemorating the bravery, resilience, and rich cultural heritage of the Zulu Nation. During the commemoration, MKRI showcased its range of services at the Isandlwana Precinct, providing engagement and information to stakeholders and community members. This participation reaffirmed MKRI's commitment to supporting heritage-driven initiatives that promote community empowerment through knowledge-sharing and contribute to sustainable social and economic development across KwaZulu-Natal.

## MKRI Richmond Digital Centre – Oversight Visit



A Delegation led by the Deputy Minister of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Dr Nomusa Ncube-Dube, conducted an oversight visit to the MKRI Richmond Digital Centre to assess programme implementation and impact. During the visit, the MKRI Chief Executive Officer, Dr Thandeka Ellenson, presented an overview of the Centre's operations, highlighting MKRI's role in expanding access to ICT skills, providing student academic and technical support, and advancing community empowerment in Richmond. The presentation demonstrated alignment with DHET priorities on skills development, digital inclusion, and employability. The Mayor of Richmond Local Municipality, Cllr Melikhaya Ngongo, commended MKRI's innovative delivery model and acknowledged the Centre's contribution to bridging the digital divide in Richmond and across KwaZulu-Natal. The visit concluded with an interactive engagement with facilitators and trainees during a live training session, providing first-hand insight into programme delivery and demonstrating the practical impact of MKRI's evidence-driven digital skills initiatives.

# World Wetlands Day Commemoration programme



MKRI participated in the World Wetlands Day Commemoration programme held in Greytown, led by the EDTEA MEC, Rev. Musa Zondi. The programme underscored the critical role of wetlands in supporting biodiversity, ensuring water security, and enhancing climate resilience. The day's activities included a tree-planting initiative and environmental awareness programme at Quarme Primary School, a site visit to a local wetland, and stakeholder engagements aligned with the 2025 theme, *"Wetlands and Traditional Knowledge: Celebrating Cultural Heritage."* MKRI exhibited & showcased its work in evidence-based policy development, sustainable environmental management, and inclusive economic development. The Institute also promoted its postgraduate bursary programme and digital centres, highlighting their role in advancing innovation, skills development, and community empowerment across KwaZulu-Natal.

## Deputy Minister Back-to-School Programme



MKRI partnered with the Office of the Deputy Minister of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), Dr N. Dube-Ncube, during the Back-to-School Programme held at Sivananda Technical High School in KwaMashu. The programme, together with the TVET Oversight Visit, forms part of DHET's ongoing efforts to strengthen learner retention, promote academic excellence, and position TVET colleges as institutions of choice for post-school education and training. As part of MKRI's contribution, hampers were donated to top-performing learners as a form of motivation and recognition. This initiative reaffirmed MKRI's commitment to youth development through education and underscored the importance of academic achievement as a catalyst for socio-economic progress.

# MSME Post G20 Debriefing Dialogue

MKRI's Economic Research Specialist, Mr Tshepiso Lefoka, delivered the keynote address at the MSME Post-G20 Debriefing Dialogue held at the MKRI Durban Campus on 31 January 2026. Mr Lefoka provided a research-driven overview of the outcomes and legacy of South Africa's 2025 G20 Summit, with a specific focus on its impact on MSMEs in township and rural economies. He also shared strategic insights on how MSMEs can position themselves ahead of the World Economic Forum scheduled for April 2027 in South Africa. Through engagements such as this, MKRI continues to support MSME development by translating evidence-based research into practical insights that enhance participation in economic platforms at all levels.



## KZN-Provincial Trade and Investment Strategy Development engagement



MKRI participated in the Provincial Trade and Investment Strategy Development engagement, where the Institute provided valuable inputs toward the review and strengthening of the existing strategy to ensure it responds effectively to the evolving socio-economic realities of KwaZulu-Natal. Through its participation, MKRI contributed research-driven insights aimed at aligning the strategy with provincial development priorities and investment promotion objectives. This engagement further reinforced MKRI's role in evidence-based planning by ensuring that credible research outputs inform trade growth initiatives and investment attraction efforts across the province.

## Youth Workshop and Exhibition



The Moses Kotane Research Institute participated in the Youth Workshop and Exhibition held at Coastal TVET College, Applesbosch Campus. During the exhibition, the Institute showcased its range of services and actively engaged with TVET students by providing clarity and insight into MKRI's mandate, mission, and programmes. This engagement formed part of a broader initiative aimed at strengthening youth development interventions, enhancing skills pathways, expanding career exposure, and promoting entrepreneurship and employment opportunities among young people.

# 'First things first' Business Breakfast



Chief Executive Officer, Dr Thandeka Ellenson, delivered a keynote address at the "First Things First" Business Breakfast held at Thembela Venue in Empangeni on 24 January 2026. Her address focused on research-informed investment priorities and provided practical financial insights drawn from *Money Mindset: Decoding the Myth of Hard Work*. The keynote aimed to empower women entrepreneurs with the knowledge and tools required to make informed, strategic, and sustainable financial decisions, while reinforcing the importance of evidence-based approaches to entrepreneurship and economic participation



## Maritime Plastic & Ocean Innovation Challenge

MKRI was proud to be part of the launch of the 2025/2026 Maritime Plastic & Ocean Innovation Challenge, supporting innovative, research-driven solutions in the blue economy.

This programme aligns with MKRI's mandate to advance innovation, skills development, and evidence-based economic growth, while turning sustainable ideas into scalable, market-ready solutions.

Shortlisted participants showcased bold ideas focused on transforming marine plastic waste into valuable, marketable products and developing innovative ocean-based solutions, including sustainable packaging, cosmetics, and marine-derived products

Winners will receive business registration support, access to funding, mentorship, and expert guidance to take their innovations to market.



### UPCOMING

- 27 Feb 2026: Maritime Graduation Programme
- 04 March 2026: Mpofana Digital Centre Launch
- 04 March 2026: Enterprise Development Summit



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# WELCOME

We are pleased to announce the appointment of our new board members, who bring a wealth of experience and strong expertise. We are confident that their knowledge and leadership will contribute significantly to strengthening our organization's strategic direction and overall impact.



Top (Left to right): Prof. Langalibalele Felix Mathenjwa, Dr. Usha Roopnarain, Prof. Thokozani Nzimakwe  
Bottom (Left to Right): Dr. Lorraine Thulisile Mwelase (Deputy Chairperson), Dr. Vusumuzi Joseph Mthembu (Chairperson), Dr. Thandeka Ellenson (CEO)

The MKRI EXCO, led by CEO, Dr. Thandeka Ellenson, officially welcomed the newly appointed Board of Directors, led by Chairperson Dr. Vusumuzi Joseph Mthembu. The engagement marked the beginning of a new chapter of strengthened governance, strategic leadership, and renewed commitment to driving research, innovation, and economic development in KwaZulu-Natal.