

COMMENTS FOR THE OAD INAUGURATION

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Today's launching of the Office of Astronomy for Development (the OAD) is historic not only for South African astronomy and the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO), but also for the International Astronomical Union. The IAU has been in existence for almost 100 yrs and for the first half-century of our existence its focus was primarily on the advancement of professional astronomy. The majority of our effort and resources were devoted to meetings and published proceedings that were oriented toward astronomical research. As a professional society the IAU first attended to the welfare of its members.

As the IAU matured and astronomy thrived with the advent of the space age there was increasing public interest in space and astronomy. The IAU responded by initiating education and outreach programs and becoming more engaged with the public. Astronomy is unique in having a huge following of amateurs who are educated and enthusiastic and knowledgeable about astronomy to the extent that they can teach and motivate others.

As is so often the case in the history of an organization a single event caused a fundamental change in the outlook and focus of the IAU: the International Year of Astronomy (IYA) in 2009 which celebrated the 400th anniversary of Galileo's use of the telescope in 1609 to study the heavens. The IAU conceived of the idea to celebrate Galileo's anniversary by conducting an International Year of Astronomy in partnership with UNESCO and the United Nations to draw attention to astronomy and the place of humanity in the cosmos. The IYA initiative represented a huge change in perspective for the IAU. We had previously concerned ourselves largely with the world's 10,000 professional astronomers. With the IYA we expanded our domain to 7 billion earthlings.

Led by my predecessor Catherine Cesarsky the IAU helped develop and then coordinated an extensive organizational network that allowed us to work with individuals and groups in 145 countries. The IYA was a spectacular success, directly touching 800 million people at a total cost of only €12 million. It was amazing value for the money. The Office of

Astronomy for Development that we are inaugurating today is to a certain extent an outgrowth of the world-wide IYA effort.

Even before the IAU commitment to the IYA some of us on the Executive Committee were advocating that the IAU should formulate a strategic plan to work with nations who were interested in using astronomy as a vehicle for science education and technology development. This planning effort, led by IAU Vice President George Miley, did take place over a 2-yr period and resulted in a Strategic Plan that envisioned various programs being undertaken and led by IAU members world-wide, that involved teacher training, visiting lectures, development of university curricula, institute twinning, and international short courses that would enhance the scientific infrastructure of countries.

An important part of the IAU plan was that these programs would be coordinated and overseen by a global office. Over one year ago we invited proposals from organizations interested in hosting this office, which would serve as an international nexus of education, outreach, and development activity. The SAAO with the support of the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) submitted a very strong proposal to host the OAD in Cape Town that included offering important resources of space and personnel and funds that were sufficiently attractive that the IAU awarded the OAD to the SAAO for its first 5-yr period. A governing board appointed by both the IAU and the NRF will set policy for the OAD and do oversight. Board members participated in the search for the initial director of the OAD that has resulted in an outstanding and experienced professional, Kevin Govender, who is known to all of you from his work in past years at the SAAO.

The IAU is excited to be launching this new initiative in partnership with the SAAO, the NRF, and the Department of Science & Technology. On behalf of the IAU I thank these three organizations for your commitment to this enterprise and the important role of science in global development. I can promise you that because of the importance of astronomy education and development that our IAU commitment to the OAD and the programs it will coordinate is strong. We look forward to working for the success of the OAD in association with all of you. And we thank those of you in attendance for the support many of you will be giving to this enterprise.

We have every confidence that the OAD will be successful and will reflect credit on the IAU and South Africa.