

ADDRESS BY KEVIN GOVENDER

Minister of Science and Technology, Mrs Naledi Pandor

President of the International Astronomical Union, Prof Robert Williams

Director General of Science and Technology, Dr Phil Mjwara

President and CEO of the National Research Foundation, Dr Albert van Jaarsveld

Director of the South African Astronomical Observatory, Prof Phil Charles

Director of Hartebeesthoek Radio Astronomy Observatory, Dr Michael Gaylard

Vice President of the IAU, Prof George Miley

General Secretary of the IAU, Dr Ian Corbett

Deputy Director General of DST, Dr Molapo Qobela

President of the Institute of Physics, Jocelyn Bell Burnell

Director of the Intl Science Programme at Uppsala Univ in Sweden, Dr Ernst van Groningen

President of the African Astronomical Society, Prof Pius Okeke

Chairman of the Ethiopian Space Science Society, Mr Tefera Waluwa

Members of the National Society for Black Physicists, Charles McGruder & Hakeem Oluseyi

Director of the Cape Town Science Centre, Ms Julie Cleverdon

Representative of the Intl Centre for Theoretical Physics, Dr Ravi Sheth

Representative of the US Consul General, Nathan Holt

Representative of the British Council, Melissa Nefdt

Council members of the Astronomical Society of Southern Africa

Delegates of MEARIM conference from Africa and the Middle East

Members of the media

Colleagues from the South African Astronomical Observatory

Colleagues from the University of Cape Town and University of the Western Cape

Students of Astronomy

The additional staff who helped put this event together

Ladies and Gentlemen

All protocol observed...

The International Astronomical Union Global Office of Astronomy for Development. Quite a mouthful. But what does it mean? What does development mean to you? And what does astronomy have to do with it?

Because we exist, fundamentally, at the centre of our own observable universes, let us calibrate our perspectives from the human point of view.

Every society, every culture, every group of human beings, no matter where they live, no matter what their skin colour, no matter what their languages, beliefs, traditions – they all have had, and still have, a few things in common.

One of those things, in fact one of the most fundamental things, that they've had in common, and still do, is the drive to live a better life. First and foremost we seek a better life for ourselves and our closest family – and then a better life for our community and the people around us – and then, eventually, a better life for all humankind. It is one of our most significantly defining characteristics. We seek betterment. We seek improvement. We seek... development. Whatever the complex psychology that has injected this insatiable pursuit into our veins – we can debate ad infinitum – the fact is that we want to make the world a better place. This is what “development” means in the context of this Office. Making a better life for all human beings. Making the world a better place to live in.

There is of course another thing that all these societies, cultures, groups of human beings have in common. That is... wait for it... a deeply embedded connection with the sky. On the one hand that's a fairly obvious statement right? Everyone on earth is subject to day and night. Everyone has to deal with the changing seasons throughout the year. And everyone sees this moon go through its cycles – not to mention big events like eclipses. But this connection goes much deeper into our combined consciousness. The changing nature of the sun and moon bring natural questions. Where does the sun go at night? What happens to the rest of a crescent moon? Why is the sun so low during winter months? And then there's the night sky! The amazing incredible awesome inexplicable night sky. What are those things? Where do they go in the day? How far are they? Why do they move? Why do some move differently from others? What is “out there”?

These questions lead to more questions – and more questions – and even more questions – questions then not just about stars, but about the blue sky, about rainbows, about lightning, about rain, about plants, about everything around us. And when we start trying to answer those questions, we become scientists. The sky and stars have been an incredible catalyst of scientific thinking and reasoning. Such thinking, such science, has brought us technology and ideas that reach well beyond the dreams of our younger selves. Technology and ideas that have made our lives better – that have led to our “development”!

Astronomy, as we call it today, has always played a role in our development, be it our scientific, technological or cultural development. However, somewhere along the way, as we dig deeper and deeper into our science, and try harder and harder to figure out the big questions in the universe, somewhere along the way we may have forgotten about the incredible power of astronomy, the incredible role that astronomy has played in shaping the human mind – or others around you may have forgotten – and all that power is not efficiently harnessed.

Astronomy is an endless source of sustainable renewable energy for our minds!

The purpose of this OAD is simple. It aims to use astronomy as a tool for global development. Remember that this is not simply about developing the field of astronomy – that comes as a by-product because one has to obviously sharpen ones tools – but the main point is that astronomy is a tool for development. This is why the name is very specifically the Office of Astronomy FOR Development – and not the Office for Astronomy Development! OAD!

In recognition of the great strength of astronomy to expand our minds, the three targeted areas that the OAD will focus on are: 1. school level education; 2. university level education and research; and 3. public understanding of science.

Now there is no way that one small office could achieve global development on its own. The structures that need to be established are regional nodes across the world (and the definitions of regions has to be a dynamic procedure) as well as sector task forces who will lead efforts on the three targeted areas mentioned before (school, university, public). All these people would initially, in all likelihood, be volunteers. There is much goodwill amongst the international community, especially after a very successful International Year of Astronomy –

so we feel very positive that there will be many volunteers. However this Office will coordinate and strategise such that those efforts can be optimised.

Today this office is being opened on this land in Africa. It is truly an honour for our continent to host and lead this global development activity, which reaches out to every corner of the world. It is a greater honour for South Africa to have been the country selected as the hosts. And it is a most humbling honour for me personally to have been selected to direct these activities and drive the vision. Thank you to the IAU for trusting our continent, our country, our organisation, with this responsibility. Thank you to the South African Department of Science and Technology for their recognition of the importance and their support. Thank you to the National Research Foundation for embarking on this project together with the IAU, by hosting the OAD at its facility, the South African Astronomical Observatory. I can assure you that the actions of this office shall be carried out with a spirit of transparency, inclusion (traditionally bottom-up), humility (no egos), and hard work for the benefit of all. This office is here for you to use in order to make your ideas happen in the most effective ways possible. I call upon you, our colleagues present here and from all over the world, to put our minds together and join hands in making the world a better place.