

Press release

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Regional Office for Science in Africa Inaugurated

PRETORIA, South Africa. - The International Council for Science (ICSU) inaugurated its first Regional Office today. Located in Pretoria and hosted by the National Research Foundation of South Africa, the ICSU Regional Office for Africa will promote the development of all fields of science throughout sub-Saharan Africa. The office will facilitate capacity building, including quality science education, training and research. Core objectives are to facilitate networks within Africa and increase participation of African scientists in international programmes.

"ICSU's mission - strengthening international science for the benefit of society - will be accomplished only by engaging scientists throughout the world," said Professor Thomas Rosswall, Executive Director of ICSU, based in Paris. "Recognizing the importance and diversity of capacity-building needs around the world, ICSU is establishing four Regional Offices." The African Regional Office is the first; three similar offices will be established in the Arab Region, Asia and the Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

"Local scientific knowledge enriches international science and is essential for wise decision-making at all scales," said Professor Jane Lubchenco, President of ICSU and an environmental scientist at Oregon State University, USA. "The needs of Africa are great, and we believe that strengthening science in Africa will reap immense benefits for its people. We have high hopes for the key role this office will play in enabling African scientists to serve society at home and abroad."

"The timing is excellent," said Professor Rosswall, "since the establishment of NEPAD, the Millennium Development Goals and the G8 focus on Africa have renewed interest in building African scientific capacity through support of individuals as well as institutions. The ICSU Regional Office can play an important role in this process."

"The Regional Office will facilitate the mobility of African scientists within the continent, including the creation of regional and international interdisciplinary scientific programmes, conferences and exchanges across the continent," said Professor Sospeter Muhongo, a renowned geologist from Tanzania and the newly appointed Director of the Regional Office for Africa. The Regional Office has set a target of doubling the number of African countries adhering to ICSU within the first year (from 16 to 32) as an initial vehicle for mobilizing and empowering scientists within the region.

South Africa was chosen to host the Regional Office by a committee composed of ICSU's African National Members. Selection criteria included the host being based in a scientific institution with good links to similar institutions in the region, long-term financial support from the host institution and its national government and ease of access from all parts of sub-Saharan Africa. "We are particularly pleased with the strong support expressed by all ICSU National Members in the region and from ICSU's International Scientific Unions," said Executive Director Rosswall. "This enthusiastic support bodes well for the success of the endeavour."

"ICSU gratefully acknowledges the generous support for the Regional Office that is provided by the Government of South Africa through the National Research Foundation (NRF)," said President Lubchenco. "The combination of those resources and the strong international reputations of the NRF and its President and CEO, Dr. Khotso Mokhele, bring instant credibility to this office and its important mission."

The inauguration ceremonies took place at the NRF Grounds in Pretoria. "ICSU is privileged and greatly honoured in having the Minister for Science and Technology of South Africa, the Honourable Mosibudi Mangena, officiate at the launch of the Regional Office," said Professor Muhongo. Before unveiling a plaque as symbolising the launch of the Regional Office, Minister Mangena stated that "the South African government is deeply honoured to be part of this milestone event" and that by hosting the office here, served "to re-affirm (South Africa's) commitment to the common and global effort to bring science solutions closer to the African people." Over 200 guests from all corners of the world, including ministers from several African countries, members of the diplomatic corps, executives of regional organizations and businesses, and distinguished scholars attending the ceremonies, heard the Minister set out the following challenge: "South Africa offers its unwavering support to the International Council for Science, the Regional Office (for Africa) and its endeavours on the continent – and equally throws down the gauntlet to sister 'compatriots' in (our common) noble cause." The global ICSU community includes delegates from numerous ICSU Scientific Unions and Affiliated Bodies, as well as its Executive Director, Rosswall and President, Lubchenco.

The Regional Offices are an integral part of ICSU's emerging Strategic Plan for 2006-2011, in which excellence in science is effectively linked to policy-making and socio-economic development. "We expect that this first regional office will set the standard for the other regional offices," said Professor Rosswall.

ICSU has a long tradition of working closely with UNESCO and TWAS (The Academy of Sciences for the Developing World), two key sister international organizations. "We look forward to collaborating with UNESCO and TWAS to strengthen science in and for Africa," said Professor Muhongo. "In addition, political processes, such as NEPAD, provide opportunities for collaboration." This sentiment was reiterated by Minister Mangena saying, "...I envisage and wish for a concerted effort of joint and mutual activities in reaching for and achieving, for instance, the Millennium Development Goals as iterated by the United Nations family of nations, and re-stated by the G8 Summit, the UK Commission for Africa, by the AU, NEPAD and most recently, at the SADC Heads of State Summit."

Founded in 1931, the International Council for Science (ICSU) is a non-governmental organization representing a global membership that includes both national scientific bodies (103 members) and international scientific unions (27 members). Through this international network, ICSU coordinates interdisciplinary research to address major issues of relevance to both science and society. In addition, the Council actively advocates for freedom in the conduct of science, promotes equitable access to scientific data and information, and facilitates science education and capacity building.

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