

INTERNATIONAL ASTRONOMICAL UNION
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Agreement signed for the IAU Office for Astronomy Development

Cape Town, 30 July 2010: The President of the South African National Research Foundation, Dr Albert van Jaarsveld and the General Secretary of the IAU, Dr. Ian Corbett, signed a landmark agreement in Pretoria today with the International Astronomical Union (IAU) which will foster and promote astronomy in the developing world.

Under the agreement the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO) at Tshwane/Pretoria will house the new IAU Office for Astronomy Development (OAD). The OAD will coordinate a wide range of activities designed to stimulate astronomy throughout the world. This is part of a pioneering ten-year plan initiated by the IAU to exploit astronomy in the service of education and capacity building in the developing world. The plan, "Astronomy for the developing world", builds on the enormously successful IAU-UNESCO International Year of Astronomy in 2009 whose activities in 148 countries reached millions of people.

According to Ian Corbett *"This is a momentous occasion and the start of something really new, which should have profound, far-reaching long term consequences for us all and not just for the developing countries. It is wonderful that South Africa has joined with the IAU in this endeavour, and has demonstrated the determination and commitment necessary to make this a success"*.

In answering, the NRF President and CEO, Dr Albert van Jaarsveld said: *"The National Research Foundation is pleased to host this office, which is significant not only for South Africa and Africa but for the entire developing world. We are pleased to be associated with this effort to use Astronomy to foster education and capacity building globally over the next decade at least. Astronomy remains one of the sources of inspiration for young people who take up careers in science and technology and go on to contribute positively in society. We are looking forward to working with the Astronomy community in developing interest in astronomy and science and technology in general"*.

The agreement formalises a decision taken in May 2010 when the IAU selected South Africa as the host for the OAD. The South African bid beat stiff competition from a field of 20 competing proposals.

George Miley, IAU Vice-President for Development and Education who also talked at the ceremony said: *"From the earliest times astronomy has had a profound effect on human development and the OAD activities will continue the role of astronomy as a highly practical discipline for society. Astronomy is a unique tool for capacity building because it combines cutting-edge technology with fundamental science and has deep cultural roots. Like the new South Africa, astronomy since its inception has been all about inspiration."*

The OAD will be operated as a partnership between the IAU and South Africa. The South African partners include the SAAO, its parent organisation the National Research Foundation (NRF), and the Department of Science and Technology, all of which have committed strong support to the IAU initiative. The agreement is for an initial period of five years.

The OAD will mobilise talented professional and amateur astronomers, engineers and teachers around the world in the service of developing countries. The wide range of activities that will be coordinated by the OAD include the education of young disadvantaged children, science education at all levels, the training of school teachers and building up research capacity in university departments throughout the developing world.

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Notes

The IAU is the international astronomical organisation that brings together almost 10,000 distinguished astronomers from all nations of the world. Its mission is to promote and safeguard the science of astronomy in all its aspects through international cooperation. The IAU also serves as the internationally recognised authority for assigning designations to celestial bodies and the surface features on them. Founded in 1919, the IAU is the world's largest professional body for astronomers.

Links

- Original press releases announcing South Africa as the OAD host:
 - IAU: http://www.iau.org/public_press/news/detail/iau1003/
 - SAAO: http://www.sao.ac.za/no_cache/public-info/news/news/article/181/16/
 - South Africa National Research Foundation: http://www.nrf.ac.za/news_articles.php?nid=67
 - South African Government: <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2010/10052609551003.htm>
- The Announcement of Opportunity: http://iau.org/static/education/announcement_opportunity_oad.pdf
- The Strategic Plan: Astronomy for the Developing World: http://iau.org/static/education/strategicplan_091001.pdf
- UN Millennium Development Goals: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>
- IAU website <http://www.iau.org>
- Some additional images from SAAO: <http://www.sao.ac.za/iau-press-release-may-2010-images/>
- SAAO website: <http://www.sao.ac.za>

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