

WORKING GROUP MEETINGS

PROBLEMS OF ASTRONOMY IN AFRICA

Working Group for the Worldwide Development of Astronomy

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OPENING REMARKS

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Only five countries in Africa have resident members of the IAU, and in some there are, quite literally, only one or two. They are isolated (communication with other countries is often difficult), poorly equipped and poorly financed --some have no current journals at all. Most of Africa faces terrible problems, so it is hardly surprising that our colleagues there have their difficulties. Astronomers are useful in developing countries, however, especially as educators, so we can help the whole continent by helping our own colleagues.

The situation is not unrelieved gloom, even in Africa. The astronomical community in South Africa is large and active, fully integrated into the world astronomical community. The recent political changes there open possibilities of regional cooperation that formerly seemed closed. The major international installations on the Canary Islands, near the coast of northern Africa, could have a vitalizing effect, and plans for restoring and upgrading the Egyptian 1.8m telescope will bring back into service another major instrument on the continent. Other plans for small instruments will be discussed at this meeting. The UN in cooperation with ESA has recognized the importance of stimulating African astronomy, and two of the recent series of workshops on basic space science, arranged by these two organizations, were held in Africa -- in Nigeria in October 1993, and in Egypt in June 1994. Unfortunately, Drs Haubold and Wamsteker, who took the initiative in these workshops, were unable to be at this meeting. The IAU is also helping; an ISYA was arranged in Morocco in 1989, and another will be held in Egypt shortly after the present General Assembly. This meeting, itself part of the IAU effort, is aimed particularly at encouraging regional cooperation on the continent. We have invited speakers from each of the five African countries, as well as one from the neighbouring, and in some respects similar, country of Saudi Arabia, to tell us of their problems and to take stock of their resources. (The formal meeting was followed by an informal dinner at which colleagues from the different African countries met and discussed means of improving communications between themselves.)