

AAG Newsletter
of the
Association of American
Geographers

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USPS 987-380 ISSN 0275-3995

The AAG Newsletter ISSN 0275-3995 is published monthly with July/August combined, by the Association of American Geographers, 1710 16th Street NW, Washington, DC 20009-3198. The cost of an annual subscription is \$25.00. The subscription price is included in the annual dues of the Association. Not available to non-members. Periodicals postage paid in Washington, DC. All news items and letters, including job listings, should be sent to the Editor at the address below or to newsletter@aag.org.

All Newsletter materials must arrive at the Association office by the 1st of the month preceding the month of the publication. This includes job listings. Material will be published on a space available basis and at the discretion of the editorial staff.

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Global Dialogues: Geography and Sustainable Development in Africa

The Association of American Geographers recently had the opportunity to participate with hundreds of African geographers, GIScientists, and environmental scientists in a new dialogue around the theme of Geospatial Science and Sustainable Development in Africa. These discussions, which were initiated in March, 2008 and have already generated several promising new areas of research and educational collaboration, were sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's Global Dialogues on Emerging Science and Technology (GDEST) program. Follow-on activities and continuing interactions resulting from these dialogues have the potential to generate considerable on-going and long-term cooperation among African and U.S. scientists in geographic research, GIScience education and applications, sustainability science, and many related fields.

Five previous GDEST programs also have been undertaken, including dialogues in Japan (on nanotechnology), China (biotechnology), and Germany (quantum computing). However, the recent Africa GDEST program is the first to be initiated on a continental scale, and the first to address geography-related research fields such as geospatial science and sustainability.

The GDEST program focusing on Geospatial Science and Sustainable Development in Africa involved a series of site visits to universities, governmental ministries, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in nine African countries, followed by a conference attended by scientists from throughout Africa on the same theme in Cape Town, South Africa.

The U.S. delegation of seventeen geographers and geospatial scientists included

representatives from the State Department's Humanitarian Information Unit and its Bureau of Oceans, Environment, and International Scientific Affairs as well as from other U.S. governmental agencies such as USGS and the Census Bureau, several U.S. universities, and scholarly societies such as the Association of American Geographers and the American Geographical Society. The teams conducted over 50 site visits and met with hundreds of African experts in geography, remote sensing, GIScience, mapping sciences, health, education, agriculture, mining, climate change, hydrology, population, urban systems, economics, environmental science, and related fields.

Care was taken to listen to and learn from our African colleagues, to identify needs rather than prescribe solutions, and to build upon existing regional capacity in geospatial science and technology rather than duplicate or displace it. Participants in the dialogues explored opportunities for collaboration between U.S. and African scientists and institutions, as well as among African organizations and networks, in ways identified as useful to scientists, educators, and governmental agencies from the region.

It was clear from both the country visits and the conference that the diffusion, use, and sophistication of geospatial technologies and applications has increased significantly, both regionally and in individual countries, since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. However, effective use of geographic information science and associated technologies for sustainable development research and practice is often hampered by a lack of resources, a lack of access to suitable



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data, and a lack of coordination among users and data producers.

African GDEST participants were interested in ongoing dialogue that would establish partnerships for collaboration on numerous specific projects and programs; expand existing cooperation among U.S. and African scientists and practitioners to create a sustainable critical mass of African expertise; support regional and indigenous networks and institutional infrastructure; and develop new educational and research collaborative mechanisms for faculty and student exchange programs, online scientific interaction, and better access to new research and curricular information.

The AAG is already implementing some of the above mentioned online collaborative resource sharing and interactive coordinative mechanisms through its new subsidized Developing Regions Membership Program, and through the AAG Center for Global Geography Education. AAG Specialty Groups, both topical and regional, can also be an important vehicle for information exchange among individuals, and for exploring areas of common research interest and/or joint funding opportunities with interested colleagues throughout Africa and the U.S. Another long-standing AAG international educational and outreach initiative, the My Community, Our Earth: Geographic Learning

for Sustainable Development (MyCOE) program, provides a well-developed interactive framework for joint project activities, and many relevant resources for students and educators both in the U.S. and in Africa.

Also important to sustaining collaboration is engaging and supporting *existing* African networks of excellence and platforms for dialogue, information sharing, and communication. For example, African *networks of excellence* such as AGIRN (African Geo-information Research Network), EIS-AFRICA (Environmental Information Systems Africa), AARSE (African Association of Remote Sensing for the Environment), MAFA (Mapping Africa for Africa), AFREF (African Reference Frame) and University networks such as UNEDRA (University Network for Disaster Risk Reduction in Africa) are vital infrastructures of communication and coordination for research, education, and applications collaboration. Descriptions of and linkages to these and many other existing African networks can be accessed directly through the AAG website at www.aag.org/developing.

The U.S. GDEST delegation representatives, both individually and in coordination with U.S. embassies in the countries visited, are currently following up on contacts and acquaintances made during the site visits and will be continuing discussions on specific

projects for which opportunities for partnerships and collaboration were identified. A report on the African GDEST program's progress and findings is under development and will be made available in the near future.

I would like to thank Lee Schwartz, Director of the Office of the Geographer and Global Issues at the U.S. State Department, together with Nina Fedoroff and Andrew Reynolds of the Office of the Science and Technology Adviser to the Secretary, for providing key leadership and logistical support essential to the success of the African GDEST program. Most importantly, on behalf of all of the participants, I would like to express our deep appreciation to our African colleagues for the opportunity to learn from them during these dialogues, and for their insight and guidance on how to sustain on-going interactions and useful collaborative activities in the years ahead.

More information on African geography and GIS research, education, and sustainable development activities, as well as on collaborative needs and opportunities is available and updated regularly on the AAG website (www.aag.org). ■

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(with thanks to Lee Schwartz for input)