

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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AAG, Harvard, State Department Focus on Science Partnerships

The AAG recently co-organized a special symposium at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, entitled "Geospatial Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in Africa: Partnerships and Applications," focused on creating dialogue across multiple sectors working on sustainable development science in Africa.

The goals of the meeting were to learn from one another's experi-

ences, identify possible synergies across sectoral divides, and foster the development of research and educational collaborations among U.S. and African scientists and educators, based on approaches and priorities identified by our African colleagues.

The symposium at Harvard is one of several ongoing follow-up activities which build on previous meetings held in Africa and at AAG Annual Meetings around the theme of "Global Dialogues on Emerging Science and Technology: Geospatial Science for Sustainable Development in Africa." The recent Harvard symposium was also designed to help prepare for and bring new resources to the upcoming AfricaGIS Conference, a continent wide summit meeting of African leaders and scientists in these fields, to be held in Kampala, Uganda, this October.

The special Harvard symposium, held in May, was co-organized by AAG Executive Director Doug Richardson, Professor Calestous Juma of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Lee Schwartz of the U.S. Department of State's Office of the Geographer, and Peter Bol, Director of Harvard's Center for Geographic Analysis. The symposium brought together fifty key U.S.-based leaders of organizations participating in African sustainable development programs, from five different sectors: government agencies, non-profit organizations (NGOs), university/academic institutions, private sector companies, and major foundations.

Multi-sector participants in the Harvard symposium included senior representatives from leading organizations in African sustainable development, such as the Bill and Melinda

Gates Foundation, Google-Earth, the John D. Rockefeller Foundation, ESRI, National Science Foundation, the Jane Goodall Institute, Lockheed Martin, Howard University, EIS-AFRICA,

USAID, the National Institutes of Health, NASA, World Resources Institute, Microsoft, and the Columbia University Earth Institute, as well as, of course, the AAG, Harvard University and the U.S. Department of State, among many others. Dr. Wilbur Ottichilo, former Director of the Nairobi-based Regional Centre for Mapping of Resources for Development (RCMRD) and now a Member of Parliament in Kenya, delivered the opening Keynote Address at the Symposium, and stressed the crucial role of science and technology infrastructure development to Africa's future.

The two-day Harvard symposium was highly successful in achieving contact across disparate sectors and in generating a purposeful and specific exchange of ideas, best practice experiences, and lessons learned by experts in government, non-profit sustainable development organizations, academia and research, and private companies in the geospatial science and technology fields. The participants welcomed the opportunity to make connections with professionals and leaders from sectors not their own. The symposium was "one of the most stimulating meetings I've been to so far this year," in the words of Prof. Claudio Cioffi-Revilla of George Mason University.

Other results to date have included new collaborations among Google, AAG, and

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EIS-AFRICA, as well as stronger relationships between the AAG and researchers at government agencies, private companies, and international NGOs. Follow-on activities have also included recent meetings with the Rockefeller Foundation at the AAG office regarding support of AAG workshops in North Africa and Asia, and lengthy meetings recently by Doug Richardson with Google in Mountain View, CA, to discuss a wide range of potential collaborative activities.

Next steps following the Harvard symposium will include a structured set of sessions and collaborative workshops with African universities, NGOs, government ministries and private sector companies, to be held this fall at the AfricaGIS Conference in Kampala, Uganda, in which many of the Harvard symposium attendees will participate. The ideas exchanged this May in Cambridge will be further developed in collaboration with a wide range of African participants at the AfricaGIS summit this fall, actively involving our African colleagues in the further evolution and improvement of existing cooperative efforts on

the ground, and the fostering of new activities as deemed needed and desired by them.

The AAG also has begun planning several cross-sectoral panels for the AAG Annual Meeting to be held in Washington, DC in 2010. These panels will include both U.S. and African colleagues, and will encourage engagement by AAG members more broadly with their university and governmental counterparts from Africa who seek educational and research interactions with U.S. geographers and related scientists.

The Harvard symposium marked another step toward fostering an open dialogue on geographical research and possible better coordination among cross-sectoral organizations active in African sustainable development research, science, and education. Its engagement of senior members of the humanitarian and development assistance communities, including foundations and governmental aid organizations, as well as representatives from a broad cross-section of the geographical community, enriches the debate and adds weight to its tangible outcomes.

Dr. Ottichilo, Dr. Juma, and Sives Govender (Executive Director of EIS-AFRICA), each in their own way challenged attendees of the Harvard symposium to take serious steps to address unmet needs for integrating geographic science and technology into sustainable development programs in Africa. The dialogue undertaken at this Harvard symposium offered promising cross-sectoral pathways for bringing not only geographic science and technology to meet African needs, but also for bringing the strength and insight of geography's interdisciplinary traditions and its place-based and critical but constructive methodologies to the needs of Africa, as defined by Africans. ■

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