

An Arab network for converging technologies

Proposed by UNESCO, the Network for Expansion of Converging Technologies in the Arab Region (NECTAR) was launched on 20 June at a regional congress in Cairo. The meeting was organized by UNESCO's Regional Bureau for Science in the Arab States, under the patronage of the Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, who is also President of the Egyptian Higher Council for Science and Technology.



Converging technologies is a generic term for technologies which interact with one another in the development of new products and services. Nanotechnology, biotechnology, information and communication technologies (ICTs) and cognitive science are all converging technologies.

UNESCO will select one or more recognized science or engineering institution from each of Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and Syria to act as the network's national focal points. These will each be responsible for developing a quality programme at their institution for education, research, innovation and the commercialization of new products involving converging technologies and the basic sciences associated with these technologies. Each institution will create an Innovation Centre in Converging Technologies within its walls and develop partnerships between universities, public research institutes and industry. It will also be expected to design exhibitions on clean technologies to raise public awareness.

Every year, the Innovation Centres in Converging Technologies will be expected to publish at least one refereed scientific publication on its research. There will also be an annual international conference to promote North–South and South–South cooperation and knowledge-sharing. An exchange programme for scientists will also be put in place to attract Arab expatriate sciences back home and a prize for innovation may be instituted.

Now that NECTAR has been launched, the next step will be to establish a seed fund with regional donors like the BAHGAT Group in Egypt to cover the initial phase of the project. A governance structure is also being put in place for the network, with a secretariat in Cairo within the newly established Egyptian Network for Technological Advancement.

Nanotechnology research in the region has received a boost recently in the Arab world with the founding of the North African Nanotechnology Research Centre in 2009 at the Smart Village near Cairo by the Egyptian government and the US-based International Business Machines (IBM), as well as the establishment of the Nanotechnology Centre of Excellence at King Abdul-Aziz City for Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia in 2008, again with IBM. A third nanotechnology centre is currently being established with the company INTEL at King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, also in Saudi Arabia.

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Launch of pan-African parliamentary science forum

On 2 May, parliamentarians from 21 African countries launched the African Inter-Parliamentary Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) at the United Nations Conference Center in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The meeting was co-organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) and UNESCO.

The core members of the forum driving this process are the Central African Republic, Gabon, The Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Morocco and Senegal. Chairing the Steering Committee will be the Hon. Abdirahin Haithar Abdi, Speaker of the East Africa Legislative Assembly based in Kenya. In early June, the draft charter for the forum was being circulated to all member parliaments for approval.

Increasingly, Members of Parliament are expected to be able to assess the implications for their country's development agenda of emerging trends in STI and



L'Oréal-UNESCO laureate Prof. Rashika El Ridi from the University of Cairo in Egypt was recompensed in 2010 for paving the way towards a vaccine against the second-most common disease after malaria, the tropical parasitic disease schistosomiasis.

evolving policy practices. Parliamentarians are being called upon to legislate on emerging or technical issues that may at times be controversial. These issues include genetically modified organisms, bioethics, the protection of indigenous knowledge, technology transfer, climate change adaptation and mitigation, nanotechnology and biodiversity conservation and use. Given the socio-economic repercussions of legislation on these issues, parliamentarians need to be aware of the importance of STI policy for facilitating empowered, people-centred decision-making.

The forum will strengthen STI governance through co-operation and dialogue among parliamentarians, policy-makers, the scientific community, industry and representatives of media, civil society and the private sector. It will promote the development, dissemination and sharing among members of national parliaments of scientific information and knowledge, experience in policy-making, legislative action and funding. It will also undertake studies and foster debate among members on issues of common interest, including poverty reduction and attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. The forum will also promote the harmonization of national legislation and policies promoting STI for development. It will capitalize on the role the media could play in communicating science to parliamentarians and to the public at large. The forum will also promote the creation or strengthening, within all African parliaments, of a committee on STI and a technology assessment structure or support agency for science and technology.

The launch preceded the second meeting of UNECA's Committee on Development, Information, Science and Technology (CODIST) taking place at the same venue, the theme of which was Innovation for Industrial Development in Africa. The newly created forum appealed for CODIST support and recommended that African parliaments adopt innovative funding mechanisms and legal frameworks to attract foreign direct investment and help reach the goal of devoting 1% of GDP to research and development in each country.

In January 2003, UNESCO and the Parliament of Finland organized a roundtable which adopted the *Helsinki Declaration* recommending the creation of sub-regional parliamentary science fora. Regional and sub-regional fora within this programme have taken place in Cairo (Egypt) in 2004, in Chandigarh (India) and Buenos Aires (Argentina) in 2005, in Tehran (Iran) in 2006, in Brazzaville (Congo) in 2008, in Mombasa (Kenya) in 2009 and in New Delhi (India) and Paris (France) in 2010.

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Oil prospection suspended in Virunga National Park

The Minister for Environment, Nature Conservation and Tourism of the Democratic Republic of the Congo announced on 18 March the suspension of oil prospecting in Virunga National Park, inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1979.



Baby gorilla in Virunga National Park

This 'is a very positive response to the concerns raised by the World Heritage Committee, the international community and UNESCO on the issue of oil exploration in the park', commented UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova. I hope,' she added, 'that the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo will abandon all plans for oil exploitation within this World Heritage site.'

The decision was announced by Environment Minister José Endundo Bononge further to the commitments made on 14 January in the *Kinshasa Declaration* signed by the Prime Minister and the Director-

General of UNESCO. Oil prospection has been suspended pending completion of a strategic environmental assessment early next year.

In May, the NGO WWF reported that a group of Congolese citizens had organized a march in support of the government's decision to suspend oil prospection in Virunga National Park. The rally was held in the fishing village of Vitshumbi on the banks of Lake Edward. The lake lies partially within the park in an area covered by much of the petroleum concession. Many villagers are fearful that petrol would pollute the river and lead to conflict.

Virunga National Park is famous for its chain of active volcanoes and the greatest diversity of habitats of any park in Africa: from steppes, savannas and lava plains, swamps, lowland and Afromontane forests to the unique Afroalpine vegetation and icefields of the Ruwenzori mountains, which culminate in peaks above 5000 m.

The park is home to one of the last remaining mountain gorilla populations. It has been on the List of World Heritage in Danger since 1994, due to the negative impact – mainly poaching – of the conflicts which have ravaged the Great Lakes region.

Virunga National Park: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/63>