
South African scientists can now engage fully with Third World Academy

Wieland Gevers

The next meeting and conference of the Academy of Sciences of the Developing World will be held in Durban in late November 2009. Hosted by the Academy of Science of South Africa, it should be marked by one of the largest-ever influxes to the country of notable scientists and scholars from developing countries. As South African scientists were excluded for political reasons from the organisation in its crucial development phases in the 1980s, the event will be of special significance.

Founded in 1983 by Pakistani Nobel laureate in physics, Abdus Salam, the academy is still generally called TWAS because of its original name, the Third World Academy of Sciences. It celebrated

its silver jubilee in Mexico City last November, attended by over 250 of its 870 fellows. Large numbers of these fellows are from India (163), China and Taiwan (148), Brazil (82), Pakistan (32) and Mexico (31), but the list extends to over 70 countries, making it by far the largest multinational science academy worldwide. The current President is Jacob Palis of Brazil.

The academy runs along similar lines to the Royal Society of London, building on the core notion of a club comprising eminent scholars—but one which seeks to serve four-fifths of the world's population. South Africa has only recently become involved in TWAS affairs, and to date only seven South African scholars have been elected to fellowships: Patricia

Berjak, Hoosen Coovadia, George Ellis, Wieland Gevers, Iqbal Parker, Daya Reddy and Pieter Steyn. The African Academy of Sciences, with its headquarters in Nairobi, is a separate body but also hosts the continent's TWAS branch.

TWAS supports the world's largest South-South research fellowship scheme, through which over 250 researchers annually are involved in exchanges between host countries such as China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Pakistan and Malaysia. The South African government has been invited to sponsor the first African extension of this scheme. Other grants support research and visiting professorships in the least developed countries. Through its off-shoot, the InterAcademy Council, TWAS has begun to play a role analogous to that of most national science academies, generating evidence-based advice and reports that focus on key science-related topics.

Crucially, the forthcoming conference will allow exposure of the South African community to TWAS fellows, many of whom will be giving public lectures and who will be encouraged to visit nearby institutions and research groups.

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