



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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Organización  
de las Naciones Unidas  
para la Educación,  
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Организация  
Объединенных Наций по  
вопросам образования,  
науки и культуры

منظمة الأمم المتحدة  
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、  
科学及文化组织

**Address by Mr Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO,  
on the occasion of the African Regional Conference for the launch  
of the International Year of Planet Earth**

**Arusha, Tanzania, 8 May 2008**

Your Excellency, President of the United Republic of Tanzania,  
Your Excellency, former President of the United Republic of Tanzania,  
Honourable Ministers,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to be here today in Arusha, for the opening of the African Regional Conference for the launch of the International Year of Planet Earth (IYPE). I am delighted to have this opportunity to return to Tanzania, which I first visited as Director-General of UNESCO in 2002.

Allow me to begin by expressing my gratitude to President Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete for his warm welcome and strong support for the IYPE. Let me also congratulate him for his nomination as President of the African Union.

Tanzania was not only instrumental in establishing 2008 as the IYPE, but has also taken the lead in implementing its objectives across Africa, as this Conference shows.

I would like to extend a warm welcome to all our African and international participants who have so enthusiastically embraced the goals of the Year.

As lead agency for the Year, UNESCO has been promoting a multistakeholder approach that brings together scientists, policy-makers, multilateral organizations

and representatives of civil society and the private sector. It is therefore very encouraging to see this morning such a large and diverse gathering.

Finally, let me congratulate the Tanzanian National IYPE Committee, and its many partners, for their work in organizing today's regional launch event.

I am confident that the IYPE will be a landmark in progress in Africa towards a more sustainable use of the continent's abundant natural resources in the service of more equitable development.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

What, then, are the main goals of the IYPE?

The ultimate aim is to draw global attention to the essential role that the Earth sciences can play in fostering a safer, healthier and more sustainable Planet.

This is the key message: building a safer, healthier and more sustainable Planet.

Our world faces profound and unprecedented threats. Climate change, rapid urbanization and population growth, escalating energy and food costs, the loss of biodiversity and the increasing risk of natural hazards: these are just some of the challenges confronting humanity at the beginning of this twenty-first century.

These challenges are borne disproportionately by the world's poorest and most vulnerable communities. They weigh particularly heavily on the peoples of Africa.

It is imperative, therefore, to find new and more effective ways of managing the Earth's resources and mitigating natural risks.

This is why the IYPE – with its message “Earth sciences for society” – is so important.

Indeed, the Year's first objective is to raise awareness of the wealth of knowledge and experience built up by the world's Earth scientists. It also seeks to ensure that this knowledge is harnessed more fully and effectively in support of national development efforts.

To achieve this goal, National IYPE Committees have been created in about seventy countries with the support of UNESCO National Commissions to lead awareness-raising activities. There are eleven such Committees in Africa, with four more being set up and eleven under consideration. The founding President of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, has become the first African IYPE Patron.

Such high-profile political interest in the Year is of particular importance, and leads me to the second main objective of the IYPE. That is, to foster closer collaboration between Earth scientists and policy-makers in order to make sure that the geoscientific knowledge we have is better mobilized for the benefit of society.

Strengthening this research-policy nexus is a high priority for UNESCO, in particular within the context of our support to the implementation of Africa's Science and Technology Consolidated Plan of Action.

Following last year's African Union Summit, and the celebration throughout 2007 of the "Year of Science in Africa", many countries have embarked on ambitious plans to reinvigorate national policies for science, technology and innovation.

Tanzania is one of them. Mr President, in the Vision 2025, you have pledged "to transform the economy into a strong, resilient and competitive one, buttressed by science and technology".

Let me assure you again that UNESCO stands ready and willing to support you in these efforts.

Already, our assistance in this area has been reinforced within the framework of the "Delivering as One" initiative in Tanzania. In alignment with national priorities, UNESCO is providing support in close collaboration with the UN Resident Coordinator and UN System agencies, as well as other development partners, in particular Japan and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

UNESCO is also mobilized to respond to other African countries as they seek support in formulating science policies to address national development challenges.

Indeed, we see the IYPE as an occasion to make further headway in this area. First, by further concentrating political attention on the role of science, especially

the geosciences, in development. And second, by promoting broader engagement in national science initiatives. I wish to seize this opportunity to make a special call to the private sector, and in particular industry leaders, to partner with us in this major drive to strengthen science systems in Africa.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The cornerstone of an effective science system is adequate human and institutional capacity. This is why the third main goal of the IPYE is to reinforce capacity in the Earth sciences, especially by encouraging more young people to take up studies in this area.

Today, there are around 400,000 Earth scientists worldwide. Unfortunately, however, developed and developing countries alike are witnessing a decline in the number of young persons studying the geosciences.

Africa, with a population of around 930 million, counts only about 100 universities or institutions which offer courses in the Earth sciences.

This is deeply regrettable, as Earth scientists are arguably more important now than ever before for the continent's development.

The quest for energy resources and raw materials has become a vital issue for the world's emerging and developing economies, notably in Africa, with its rich reserves of precious minerals, such as cobalt, copper and uranium. The rational exploitation of these resources is likely to be one of the keys to Africa's future prosperity, especially when value is added to these resources, thereby creating employment and enhancing revenue.

Yet, how can a nation benefit from its Earth resources if it does not have enough geoscientists to give advice on their effective and sustainable management and use?

In order to address this need, UNESCO proposes to launch an Earth sciences education programme for all of Africa and invites African IYPE National Committees to actively participate in its development.

I am very encouraged by the strong emphasis that African IYPE Committees are placing on Earth sciences education and on encouraging young people to pursue their interests in the geosciences.

Tanzania has helped to lead the way in this regard, with an essay-writing competition for school children. The Africa-wide campaign includes the distribution to schools of materials for teaching geology, field excursions for pupils, and the development of TV programmes on the Earth sciences.

In addition, to coincide with the African launch of IYPE, UNESCO, in cooperation with the Tanzanian National Commission for UNESCO, has organized space education workshops for secondary school students and teachers in Dar-es-Salaam and here in Arusha.

I would also like to recall the success of the global IYPE Student contest, initiated last year to encourage creative approaches to the Earth sciences. There were twenty-nine student winners from Africa – four from Tanzania – who were invited to participate in the Global Launch of the Year at UNESCO Headquarters in February.

It is very encouraging to see that as a result of these and other IYPE activities, the geosciences have already been re-introduced into the secondary-school curricula of several countries. I strongly encourage other African countries to take steps in this direction.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me turn briefly to some of the activities UNESCO is spearheading in Africa in support of the IYPE.

I am pleased to say that we are building here on a long history of collaboration, notably within the framework of the International Geosciences Programme (the IGCP), which UNESCO jointly leads with the International Union of Geological Sciences.

Africa's geoscientific community has been actively engaged in this Programme since its inception in 1972. Today, twenty-eight African countries are participating in twenty-two of the thirty-eight IGCP projects. This is helping to target expertise and

research on major development challenges, from the management of groundwater resources to mineral extraction and the mitigation of geo-hazards.

Another focus of our action is to help African countries gain access to geo-data and to set-up information systems for geological research using modern technology, such as satellite imagery for remote sensing. For example, the Pan African Geological Information System (PANGIS), established in 1987, uses UNESCO software and personal computers to reorganize bibliographical and factual geodata, thus making them more accessible to scientists and engineers from other disciplines, as well as to managers and policy makers.

UNESCO is mobilizing three of its global flagship initiatives in support of the IYPE. These are: the Man and the Biosphere programme, which boasts 70 reserves in 30 African countries; the World Heritage Programme, which includes 33 natural and 3 mixed (natural and cultural) sites on the continent; and the Global Networks of Geoparks. Yesterday, I immensely enjoyed my visit to Ngorongoro, Tanzania's first World Heritage Site.

Several African countries have expressed an interest in joining the Network, which can bring immense benefits, both in terms of knowledge exchange and capacity-building, and with regard to promoting tourism and economic development. Africa is rich in outstanding national geological sites. For example, the famous Olduvai Gorge – just 200 km west of Arusha – has yielded some of the oldest fossils of ancestors of humankind, such as *Australopithecus boisei* and *Homo habilis*. I hope that through the IYPE we will excite much broader interest in the preservation and promotion of this remarkable geological heritage.

One particular concern for UNESCO is to encourage more African women to become geoscientists. Just last month, we jointly organized the fourth international conference of the Association of African Women Geoscientists in Cairo, Egypt. The Conference attracted more than two hundred participants from Africa and beyond to share their experience, knowledge and ideas for the sustainable future of the African continent.

Finally, let me mention the International Geological Congress, which will be held in Oslo this August. Convened under the patronage of UNESCO, and bringing together around 7,000 geoscientists, this is another key event that will help put

“geosciences in the service of society” firmly on the map. UNESCO will support the participation of several African geoscientists in the Conference, to ensure that Africa’s perspective and concerns are brought to the fore.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me close by once again thanking the Government of Tanzania, and in particular President Kikwete, for hosting this very important event, both for the Year and for Africa. I am confident that you will have rich and fruitful discussions, and look forward to hearing the results of your deliberations.

Thank you.