



AFRICA CALLING

Scientific and diplomatic leaders from Africa, Italy and TWAS celebrated their historic partnership – and future cooperation.

by Cristina Serra



Africa’s social and economic development in fields such as health, education, food security and water management has greatly benefitted from international scientific cooperation. Through strong historic ties with Africa, the Italian government and TWAS have played an important role in this process.

To celebrate this partnership, high dignitaries, diplomats, policymakers, members of the Italian Parliament and scientists from Italy and Africa met in Rome on 27 May 2014, during the international Africa Day, to set the stage for future collaborations.

The meeting – “Africa and Italy: Scientific Cooperation for Sustainable Development” – was organized by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MAE], which has a long partnership with TWAS and Africa. The event also marked the 51st anniversary of the formation of the Organization of African Unity, which was renamed the African Union [AU] in 2002. The event was held at Farnesina Palace, headquarters for MAE.

“Italy wants to be part of the virtuous dynamism of the African continent by making the most of a historic presence that has already contributed to the social growth and infrastructure of Africa”, said Federica Mogherini, at that time the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, in her opening speech.

Mogherini was introduced to the audience by MAE Secretary-General Michele Valensise, who chaired the event.

Marièm Aouffa, Mauritania’s interim ambassador to Italy, spoke on behalf of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, president of Mauritania and current chair of the AU. She said that Africa is a rich and young continent with remarkable growth rates and potential. But she also observed that agriculture and food security should be at the heart of its development.

Among the African diplomats was Mamadou Kamara Dékamo, the ambassador to Italy of the Republic of Congo since 2000 and the Minister of Health and Population from 1997 to 1999. In his speech, Dékamo urged the international community to take action against civil turmoil

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▲ Participants in the Africa Day celebration, from left: Minister Roberto Cantone, MAE Undersecretary Mario Giro, Italian Embassy Counselor Pier Attinio Forlano and Marièm Aouffa, Mauritania’s interim ambassador to Italy.

▼ TWAS Executive Director Romain Murenzi, left, hands the TWAS President’s Award for lifetime achievement in building scientific capacity in Africa to Jean-Pierre Ezin, a professor at University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin.





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that is troubling nations such as Mali, the Central African Republic and Somalia. He also emphasized the importance of the Africa Day because Africa, he said, is the cradle of humankind.

In the Italian delegation were also MAE Undersecretary Mario Giro; Minister Roberto Cantone, director of the MAE Bilateral and Multilateral Scientific and Technological Cooperation Unit; and Edoardo Vesentini, professor emeritus at the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei and a TWAS Fellow since 2001.

Today, Africa is a vibrant continent that blends light and shadow. It is a place where education programmes are becoming more substantial, birth and infant mortality are decreasing and some nations are experiencing increased prosperity. But it is also a place where

civil conflict, humanitarian crises and epidemics too often impede progress.

It's a place where foreign direct investment has increased by more than 80% during the past decade, even as 47% of people in sub-Saharan Africa live on \$1.25 a day or less.

TWAS has long focused on Africa's development, a role that was reflected in the Rome event. The Academy's delegation included Executive Director Romain Murenzi; Jean-Pierre Ezin, professor at the *Institut de Mathématiques et de Sciences Physiques de l'Université d'Abomey-Calavi*, Benin; and Segenet Kelemu, a 2011 TWAS Prize winner and now the director of the International Center for Insect Physiology and Ecology [icipe], based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Murenzi, Ezin and Kelemu each gave the audience a vivid personal perspective on African science. Murenzi retraced the origins of the Academy and its evolution until the present time. He mentioned TWAS founder Abdus Salam, a Pakistani physicist and Nobel Prize winner, and Founding Fellows Thomas Odhiambo from Kenya, TWAS Treasurer and former TWAS Executive Director Mohamed H.A. Hassan of Sudan, and chemist Lydia Makhubu from Swaziland, whose inspired vision helped the establishment of the Academy in 1983.

Murenzi also highlighted TWAS's emerging role in science diplomacy, where the Academy has partnered with the Italian MAE on several events. During a ceremony, he conferred on Ezin a special award in recognition of his lifetime achievement in building scientific capacity in Africa.

Kelemu, born in Ethiopia, is the first woman to serve as the icipe director general, and was a 2014 winner of the L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science Award. Africa is not a continent to pity, she said in her speech. "Africa has the world's youngest population and the highest concentration of arable land, plus advancing use of the Internet and mobile phones. That's why solutions for many of our problems are literally around the corner."

Giro gave the concluding remarks. He praised the Trieste system for its international impact and he confirmed the Italian government's commitment to support TWAS and Trieste's other international scientific institutes. ■