

*Report about the IST Africa 2008 Conference,
May 7-9, 2008, Windhoek, Namibia from the
eGY Africa Prespective*

By

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The EU-Africa IST Conference was held in Windhoek, Namibia, 7-9 May 2008. This was the third EU-Africa IST event, following events in South Africa in 2006 and Mozambique in 2007. The Namibian event was well attended. The majority of attendees came from Namibia and its neighboring South African countries. A good number of delegates from Europe, interestingly with a majority coming from Norway and Sweden, also attended. In regards to our goal for the conference: awareness creation regarding the eGY-Africa initiative (see below) and building partnership with interested parties. With this intention we gave specific focus to the session on **Building a Research Network Infrastructure**. To maximize our opportunities at the conference Drs. Alem Mebrahtu and Victor Chukwuma met with delegates jointly and individually and received much support from Dr. Boubakar Barry, Director, AAU NREN unit. The African Union Commission (AUC) was represented by Dr. Abdul Hakim Elwaer, the Director of HRST (Human Resources and Science and Technology), the Economic Commission was represented by Ms. Aida Opoku-Mensah, the director, ICT and Science and Technology division, Ubuntunet Alliance (www.ubuntunet.net) was represented by the acting CEO, Dr Francis F. Tusubira, Dante (=Delivery of Advanced Network Technology to Europe available at www.dante.org.uk) was represented by Ms. Cathrin Stover, the International Relations Manager while KTH information and Communication Technology (www.ict.kth.se) was represented by Professor Bjorn Pehrson. Drs. Alem Mebrahtu and Victor Chukwuma used the opportunities offered by various segments of the conference to introduce the eGY initiative and discuss its goals specifically to these delegates, and were successful in extracting direction, commitment to continuity of interaction and various levels of support for the eGY from the representatives of the different institutions and companies. We have been in communication with some of the delegates and await the response of others: Ubuntunet Alliance is looking forward to participating in the eGY 2009, while Ms. Cathrin Stover has sent her comments to eGY-Africa. We found here comments quite encouraging. As the presentations and the consecutive round table discussions of the session of **Building Research Network Infrastructure** go on, it is

important to report that Dr. Abdul-Hakim Elwaer told the participants that the AUC did not seem to be aware of the efforts by regional NREN eg UbuntuNet, and that there were ongoing initiatives, for example the support by the Indian government, that were already bringing connectivity to African research and education institutions via a planned fiber optics landing and distribution via VSAT. However, it was emphasized by the African academics present that VSAT connectivity would be far from sufficient for their needs. To move the REN agenda forward, it was agreed that NRENs should follow up the contacts with AUC and NEPAD until a level was reached where progress was one of the reporting requirements at continental ministerial and heads of government levels. Hakim stated that he would support any such approaches, if possible starting with the upcoming Ministers of ICT meeting in Cairo during Africa Telecomm 2008. He also stressed that such efforts that which are intended to improve the challenges in Africa should be communicated with the AUC as this approach at least avoids some redundancy. It is also our recommendation that there should be a coordination and communication between and among those who are doing similar efforts. Particularly we recognize that it is important that the AAU and eGy-Africa work as strategic partners in the creation of a regional NREN in Africa; and also the eGY-Africa needs to develop partnership with Dante. eGY Africa needs the usual support from its international supporters for such collaborations as it has eGY Africa lacks the financial capacity for establishing reliable and sustainable partnerships.

The eGY (Electronic Geophysical Year) (www.egy.org) provides a cooperative international framework for developing the sharing of data and information about our planet and geo-space. EGY adopts and extends the ideals of the International Geophysical Year fifty years ago (1957-58), when the foundations of a global geo-science “information commons” were created. Scientists and decision makers from rich and poor countries alike can benefit from open access to data and information, but only within the limitations of their cyber-infrastructure.

EGY is an opportunity to take steps to improve Internet connectivity and the cyber-infrastructure available to scientists and educators in Africa. With the eGY age coming to an end at the end of year this (as agreed at the Boulder eGY General Meeting 5-6 March 2008, Boulder Colorado, USA) there was an urgent need to sustain the ideals of the eGY at the African level since the digital divide between Africa and the rest of the world is still a big challenge.

The eGYAfrica is an eGY (www.egy.org) activity to use advocacy to secure better cyber-infrastructure and internet access for universities and

other research, education, and training institutions in Africa and consequently play its role to minimize the current prevailing digital divide by improving the situation in Africa.

The ultimate goal of eGY Africa is to make African communities wealthier, safer, and more sustainable through full participation in the information revolution. Participation in the information revolution is conditional on the existence of a cyber-infrastructure to connect people and machines to the world community and the vast resources of information and services that exist. This is particularly important for scientists and technologists who have the responsibility of producing and using information and knowledge to inform decision-makers and deliver societal benefits. Modern ICT (Information and Communications Technology) is marketed as a quickly implemented and low-cost way for poor communities to share on equal terms with rich ones the benefits of the information revolution. In practice, the digital divide is growing and denying poor countries access to those very benefits. The situation is particularly acute in universities, where internet services are commonly poorer than in those provided (at high cost) through the private sector. The government owned ones are not any more different as they are not well equipped and are limited in capacity. In many African universities one may need hours to make correspondence of an E-mail.

Thanks to the unreserved efforts of Drs. Charles Barton, eGY and eGY Africa Chairman, and Bill Peterson, eGY Secretary General, the eGY Africa has got the opportunity to participate at IST-Africa 2008 Conference held in Windhoek, Namibia from May 07-09 by its Secretary General and its Co-chair.

The IST (Information Society Technologies) Africa 2008 (www.IST-Africa.eu) was an international conference mainly focusing on ICT, S&T, Networking, eLearning and eHealth with around 300 participants from 40 countries. The main aims of the travel to Windhoek were to

- I. promote the ideals of eGY Africa to African scientists, educators and officials as well as public and private enterprises who are engaged in ICT activities
- II. create awareness about eGY Africa,
- III. establish national eGY groups in different African universities and education and research institutions and
- IV. establish collaborations with organizations and individuals who have the interest to collaborate with and support the initiatives of eGY Africa.

Some of the successes we have achieved at the IST Africa 2008 Conference are the following:

1. Promotion of eGY Africa using different forums and private discussions (Dr Boubakar Barry, Chairman of the Association of African Universities, in his presentation at the conference has dedicated some of his slides to promote the eGY Africa for a bigger audience).
2. Awareness creation particularly with African Officials (Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) (www.unesa.org), African Union (AU) Commission (www.africa-union.org), representatives of the ministry of education (Namibia, Mozambique) and science and technology commissions (Namibia, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa) and Scientists from different African universities and research centers. This is mostly done on person to person discussion.
3. Dialogue for establishing collaborations with organizations who have one way or the other similar activity to that of eGY Africa. These organizations include the UBUNTUNET ALLIANCE, CAAST-Net (www.caast-net.org), a bi-regional support platform for cooperation in science and technology between Europe and Africa funded by the EU FP7 (framework program), SPIDER (The Swedish Program for ICT in Developing Countries), IST Secretariat, UNESCO (Division of Science Policy and Sustainable Development Natural Science Sector, State Informatics Limited (www.stateinformatics.com)).
4. Looking for financial, organizational and institutional support from organizations which have programs to support the improvement of Internet Connectivity and cyber infrastructure in Africa.
5. Establishing contact person/s from different countries for establishing national eGY groups. We have managed to establish contact persons from Uganda, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa and Mozambique.