

The ‘Astronomy for the Public’ Task Force

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Abstract. One of the ways in which astronomy can stimulate development is by raising awareness of our place in the universe among the general public. This contributes to inspiring people and brings the scientific community and scientific thinking closer to everyone. The IAU OAD has set up one task force dedicated to ‘Astronomy for the Public’. Proposed activities of the task force range from low-tech astronomy outreach to citizen science. We will present the task force, its objectives and potential developmental impacts for the first few years of operation.

The Earth is populated by over 7 billion people. There are of the order of 20,000 astronomers in the world† The International Year of Astronomy in 2009 reached over 800 million people. This is an achievement that this task force can build on. The motivation for using Astronomy for Development lies in the unique characteristics of the science: it attracts people by its beauty and vertiginous perspectives and opens their minds to critical thinking, environmental awareness, diplomacy and peace, and is a source of inspiration for young and old alike.

One outcome of the 1st Communicating Astronomy with the Public (CAP) Conference in 2003 was the Washington Charter that commits endorsing organisations to recognise the value of public outreach and pursue efforts to carry out such outreach. In 2006, the General Assembly of the IAU saw the CAP working group become Commission 55. Was the IAU prepared for the public’s response to the reclassification of Pluto? Probably not entirely but efforts were made and authoritative resources created to answer the questions of the general public.

2009 saw the International Year of Astronomy become the most successful coordinated scientific outreach effort ever with a reach of over 800 million people worldwide and many other achievements. That year, the IAU General Assembly adopted the proposed decadal Strategic Plan ‘Astronomy for Development’. Since, the Office of Astronomy for Development (OAD)‡, whose purpose is to realise the vision of the Strategic plan, has started operations (2011) and special focus task forces have been set up (2012). Task Force 3 (TF3) concerns itself with ‘Astronomy for the Public’ in this context. One of the roles of TF3 is to evaluate projects submitted under an annual call for proposals for the OAD. The first such call was opened at the beginning of August 2012. Additionally, TF3 will work closely with the newly set up IAU Office for Public Outreach. In the future, TF3 will help develop and implement activities for the public and collaborate with Commission 55.

A Task Force Management Team has been set up with members representing a diversity of expertise and geographical backgrounds (see the OAD website). The team will evaluate the proposals coming for funding and fundraising by the OAD.

† The IAU membership is of the order of 10,000. Adding graduate students worldwide and non-practising astronomers probably doubles that figure.

‡ OAD website: <http://www.astro4dev.org/>

A broad variety of projects can be carried out under the umbrella of the IAU OAD. It is important to note that the IAU OAD is actively looking to support innovations in the field. The 1st call for proposals was open for projects requiring between 1000-5000 euro funding with a deadline set for September 30. The TF3 team will evaluate these and create a list of projects recommended for funding. The proposals that are considered worthwhile but cannot be funded immediately will be added to a wish list that the OAD will use for further fundraising efforts.

The criteria for the proposal evaluation can be found on the OAD website. The most important is probably the alignment with the goals of the IAU Strategic Plan. The good news is that the call is open to anyone. TF3 is committed to transparent feedback to the proposers and the call for funding is annual, so anyone can reapply next year.

Astronomy is a deeply human endeavour. The amazement of seeing the universe from a new perspective is something that can be created with the simplest tools (simple telescopes) and most complex initiatives (large citizen science projects). The potential impact of public outreach is of the scale of the public it is trying to reach. The TF3 management team therefore encourages anyone with a good idea to submit their proposal this year and every following year. ‘Astronomy for the Public’ is a 7-billion-strong opportunity.