

FM15
Astronomy for Development

Summary: FM15 Astronomy for Development†

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Abstract. This summary captures, in the broadest sense, some of the achievements, challenges and spirit of the astronomy for development community at the 30th General Assembly of the IAU.

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1. Introduction

The two-day Focus Meeting 15 (FM15): Astronomy for Development comprised two poster sessions, a series of invited and contributed talks, panel discussions, and a brainstorming session. In particular the meeting aimed to bring together science communicators, experts from development and science policy backgrounds, and astronomers in the various Divisions of the International Astronomical Union. A key theme of FM15, and of the 30th IAU General Assembly in a broader sense, was the pronounced inclusion of astronomy for development in the 10 year strategic plan of the International Astronomical Union. This is articulated as Goal #3: “The IAU promotes the use of astronomy as a tool for development in every country”.

It became clear through the submissions to FM15 that the landscape of astronomy for development is evolving rapidly. While the astronomy community has converged on a shared understanding of development where the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are central, we are cognisant that “development” itself is a fluid concept, being rapidly redefined at global, regional and domain-specific levels.

2. Selected Highlights

This meeting covered a great many aspects of astronomy for development, and one can't do them justice in this short summary. I discuss a few short examples below:

- Astro-tourism is emerging as a strong focus in the astronomy for development community. It has the potential to contribute to the economic empowerment of societies that live around observatories or other astronomy-related attractions. (See submissions by Patatanyan, Jiwaji and El Yazidi).
- The United Nations sustainable development goals provide a broad, international focus for development efforts over the coming decade. Chinigò's submission points out that it is possible to lose focus on small communities and individuals when adhering to

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a global definition, and care must be taken to conceptualise development at different scales: international goals, regional and community-based.

- Contributions from the astronomy for education community resulted in a renewed understanding of the topology of the astronomy education landscape (Bretones, Eriksson, Alves-Brito, Gutiérrez and many others). Specifically, the need for an astronomy teaching practitioners journal was highlighted. These developments are foundational for the establishment of the Office of Astronomy for Education in the forthcoming triennium. This new office is expected to have a close, synergistic relationship with the Office of Astronomy for Development and Office for Astronomy Outreach. Specific implementation possibilities include existing working groups, such as those on solar eclipses or magnetic activity (Division E), where clear opportunities for aligning science, outreach and education are available.

- A panel discussion led by Division presidents or representatives suggested the establishment of an inter-divisional working group or think-tank that may interface with other disciplines to address development imperatives. Areas such as data and related techniques (Divisions B and H), high energy detector technology (Division D) and citizen science and astronomy education research (Division C) would benefit from and contribute to such a cross-disciplinary forum.

- Accessibility and inclusion featured prominently in the programme, with discussion of specific interventions (Voelker, Spuck, Gastrow & Diaz Merced) as well as systemic changes that would be required to allow broader participation in astronomy. This was complemented by similar focus from the IAU through the Inspiring Stars exhibition.

- In various sessions of FM15, it was noted that recognition and respect for the value that is added by social science (López, Gastrow & Diaz Merced) and the progress that has already been made by other disciplines in the science for development narrative. Such awareness is essential in a field where progress is so strongly dependent on nurturing cross-disciplinary relationships.

- Many excellent contributions were made through poster presentations. Some of these are available as part of the supplementary material to the FM 15 proceedings.

3. Challenges

As at 2018, there are now ten regional offices of astronomy for development. While these regional offices subscribe to a common vision, there is significant variation in focus areas and implementation of the astronomy for development vision. This is a strength, because regions can accommodate localised needs, but also a challenge because one can get complacent with one's own understanding of development and progress. It is clear we need to work harder to engage in the local and global definitions of development, using the network of regional offices to drive this.

Work on sustainable development is interdisciplinary by nature, and there are many science-for-development initiatives from other disciplines. The cross-disciplinary nature of development work requires humility, funding and mutual respect. While we keep looking to redefining and updating our understanding of development, it is worth noting that the concept of astronomy for development is now embedded in the IAU. The time is ripe for an audacious vision that will allow astronomers to mobilise, alongside other scientists, economists and development agencies, in an effort to tackle the big socioeconomic and environmental issues facing the planet.

Supplementary materials

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1743921319005349>.