

## INAUGURATION CEREMONY OF THE ICSU REGIONAL OFFICE FOR AFRICA

### Statement from the Regional Director (Sospeter Muhongo)

#### **My fellow scientists in Africa and in the ICSU family and its partners,**

I humbly and joyfully welcome all of you to this historic inaugural ceremony of the first, of the four, Regional Offices of the International Council for Science (ICSU). We feel greatly privileged and honoured that many of you have travelled from all corners of the world to dignify this historic event of the establishment of the ICSU Regional Office in Africa. This, in itself, is a profound testimony of the importance attached to this Regional Office and its objectives. We are indeed grateful to Channel Africa for broadcasting the Inauguration proceedings across the continent and through many African languages.

It is an immense pleasure for me, on this occasion, to highlight the objectives of this Regional Office in the realm of ICSU strategic plan of 2006-11 and of the development goals and expectations of the African continent.

The International Council for Science (ICSU) has been in existence for the past 74 years, but if we consider its two predecessors, namely the International Association of Academies (IAA; 1899-1914), and the International Research Council (IRC; 1919-1931), we may say that ICSU has been in existence for the last 106 years. Thus, it is one of the oldest non-governmental organizations in the world. On 11 October 2004, the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the National Research Council (NRF) of South Africa signed an agreement on establishing an office of the Regional Office in Pretoria (South Africa). We are today witnessing the translation of that agreement into a reality through the establishment an office which is hosted by NRF in Pretoria. This is a great landmark achievement in the scientific history of the African continent.

The social and economic problems being experienced in Africa are not new to you. They include lack of quality science education at all levels, persistent and severe shortages of food, water, health service, shelter and fossil fuel (energy). Transport, communication and IT infrastructures are inadequate and in some places they are non-existing. The scourge of HIV/AIDS pandemic has a devastating effect on human and social capital that reverses developmental gains almost throughout the Sub-Saharan Africa. Strategies, facilities and knowledgeable and skilled human resource to combat calamities caused by natural hazards such as earthquakes, landslides, floods and tsunamis are missing. Deforestation, over-grazing and the subsequent erosion and other

related man-made and natural processes have wiped out fertile soils in the continent.

In the context of all these challenges, ICSU has developed a Global Strategic Plan that provides guidance for implementation of time-bound priority programmes (2006-11). It has also set out specific goals and targets to enable us attain our objectives, notably of strengthening international science for the benefit of society by the year 2011. The Regional Office for Africa will implement the ICSU's strategic plan based on the concrete needs and specific realities of our continent. Moreover, ICSU's programmes and activities will add impetus to the planned commitment to accelerate economic growth in the African countries. This goal is a prerequisite for a robust fight to reduce poverty and later eradicating it completely, thereby, improving the standard and quality of living of the people of Africa. The great achievements recorded by ICSU in the developed countries should inspire African scientists to apply science in solving Africa's socio-economic problems.

### **My fellow scientists, fellow Africans,**

ICSU is seized of the hard tasks and challenges ahead. In order to achieve its core mission of building stronger links between science and society, it consistently lays emphasis on fostering strategic alliances with a wide variety of partners such as UNESCO and other UN organizations, the Academy of Sciences for the Developing World (TWAS) and other international science organizations. In our specific context, the Regional Office has already approached the African Union (AU), NEPAD, SADC, ECOWAS and the East African Community (EAC), to name but a few, for cooperation.

ICSU belongs to all of us. Thus, it now has a stronger footing in Africa with an ambitious aim of assisting the continent to improve the quality of science education and research, and enabling it to produce a suitably and highly skilled, knowledgeable and productive human resource. This decentralized structure offers a unique participatory economic space for different regions of the world to respond to the challenges of a competitive global economy. Consequently, the ICSU Regional Office for Africa is now one of the key engines of development in the continent. The clarion call is for us now to reflect on the needs of the peoples of Africa and to extend total support to the ICSU Regional Office to be innovative, productive and vibrant and to become a dynamic agent of development for which Africans can be proud of.

### **Why does the Regional Office plan to do all these?**

ICSU believes that science provides the critical underpinning for innovation and technological development. It provides necessary, although not sufficient, input

to ensure sustainable socio-economic development of societies. At the same time, science provides a vital base for rational and prudent public policy formulation and decision-making. Thus, accelerated development of scientific knowledge and skills are key factors in the reduction of poverty, and improvement of the quality of peoples lives. It has also been unequivocally proven that science is an important tool for maintenance of global peace and security.

Let me end my brief statement by underscoring the importance of science by citing **Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)**. **Writing on the Life of Galileo in 1939, he said the following, *“the aim of science is not to open the door to infinite wisdom, but to set a limit to infinite error.”***

**I wish you a happy historic day of the Inauguration of the ICSU  
Regional Office for Africa in Pretoria (South Africa).**

**Thursday, 01 September 2005**