TWAN: A way of networking third-world astronomers

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Abstract. This talk describes a proposal to set up a series of international institutions in different parts of the world to serve as nodes in a network that links astronomers from the developing nations worldwide. This network, along with its nodes is visualized as an economic way of upgrading the facilities for teaching, research and development of astronomy in the Third World countries. By way of illustration, the modus-operandi of the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics in Pune, India is described. A network of this kind is suggested as a cost-efficient way of sharing limited resources.

Keywords. Third World Astronomy Network (TWAN); IUCAA, India

1. Introduction

The idea of a Third World Astronomy Network (TWAN) was aired first at the special session of the IAU General Assembly held in Manchester in 2000 (see Narlikar 2001a). I will first briefly review the basic idea as proposed then.

The aim of TWAN is to bring together astronomers from third world countries together in a network that is empowered to provide them with assistance to improve their research, teaching and developmental facilities. The network concept helps share limited resources in a cost-effective way, using the benefits of the emerging communications technology.

The basic structure of TWAN can be visualized as a group of nations in a region which are linked together and serviced by a ‘node’, the nodes themselves being connected to one another in a worldwide network. A typical node is an international centre or institute that carries out certain mandated activities to serve the above-mentioned aim of TWAN.

By way of illustration, I mention two institutions that carry out activities somewhat similar to what is intended for the TWAN nodes. These are the Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics (AS-ICTP) in Trieste, Italy and the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (IUCAA) in Pune, India.

The AS-ICTP was set up more than four decades ago by Abdus Salam, a distinguished theoretical physicist who hailed from Pakistan. From his own personal experience Salam had felt the need to create an international resource centre which would help physicists from the Third World nations to fulfill their aspirations of carrying out top class research. To this end the ICTP was created in Trieste in 1964 and it has served as a place where Third world scientists can visit to use the Centre’s library and other resources, attend schools and workshops and meet scientists from other countries to forge new collaborations. Since its inception, the ICTP has expanded its sphere of subjects beyond theoretical physics. The centre is supported largely by the Italian Government as well as by UNESCO and the International Atomic Energy Agency. It was named after its founder Professor Salam, after he passed away in 1996. For details of how the centre came about, see the interesting article by Professor Salam (1990).