

Science and society

Physicists lay plan for developing world

Nearly 300 delegates from almost 90 countries across the world attended a conference in Durban, South Africa, last month to explore how physics can be used for the benefit of developing nations. The three-day World Conference on Physics and Sustainable Development, which formed part of the 2005 International Year of Physics, generated a series of recommendations for how physics education, energy technology, physics-based health systems and economic development could be used to improve living standards in developing countries.

The theme that attracted the greatest interest at the conference was education. The challenges in this area are huge, with many children in the developing world deprived of a primary education: in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, about 40% of primary-school age children do not attend school (*Physics World* October pp12–13). Delegates recommended a four-



Education to the fore
Teaching and learning were key themes at the Durban conference.

pronged approach to tackling the problem in physics: set up a website to provide educational resources; develop new teaching materials that emphasize the role of physics in sustainable development; establish model teacher-training workshops; and enhance the use of travelling physics laboratories.

One of the recommendations made in the area of economic development was to set up a centre that can train physicists how to commercialize their research. The proposed four-week courses are to be piloted next year at the International Centre for Theoretical Physics in Trieste, Italy, with the UK's Institute of Physics providing some funding. The Institute's Peter Melville, who attended the Durban meeting, says that some of the delegates did not see the need for the proposed courses, especially given the large number of business schools that already exist around the world. But he

adds that others were very enthusiastic about the idea and points out that the courses will be specifically tailored for physicists from the developing world.

There were also a number of proposals in the fields of energy and health, the former including the investigation of new types of batteries and improved internal-combustion technology; the development of solar-cell technology; and the production of a new type of cheap biomass power plant for small communities.

However, Marvin Cohen of the University of California, Berkeley and president of the American Physical Society, who was also present at the meeting, cautioned that the recommendations were merely preliminary and could be refined over the coming months.

Whatever the final form of the recommendations, delegates agreed that the hard part will be ensuring that their aspirations are acted upon. Indeed, the draft resolution states that "the conference will not have been a success unless a year from now we and our physicist colleagues are actively engaged in follow-up actions".

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