

Africa Materials Research Society (MRS-Africa) Held Inaugural Meeting

The creation of a Materials Research Society for Africa was first suggested at an international workshop held in Pretoria, South Africa, in 2000. MRS-Africa is now organized in four chapters representing the regions of Northern, Eastern, Western, and Southern Africa, and ~100 scientists, from 24 different countries, have met in Dakar, Senegal, December 10–17, 2002, to inaugurate the new Society. The meeting featured technical talks and poster presentations, an inaugural business meeting for the new society, visits from various dignitaries, and several meetings between government agencies.

The conference was hosted by the Western Africa chapter and the University Cheikh Anta Diop, in Dakar (UCAD Dakar). Sited near the westernmost point of the African continent, the meeting provided an outstanding location for the networking and scientific exchange that is the hallmark of an MRS-type meeting. The organizing committee headed by meeting chair Aboubaker Chédikh Beye of UCAD Dakar served the attendees' technical, social, and cultural needs.

The assembled group of scientists adopted a draft constitution for MRS-Africa, on December 12, and elected as its first president Yunnus Ballim, head of the Department of Civil Engineering at Witwatersrand University in South Africa. It was agreed that MRS-Africa will meet annually, hosted in rotation by its chapters, and that the chapter hosting the next meeting will hold the presidency of the continent-wide organization.

A number of discussions were held among government research agencies from Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and the United States, focusing on the creation of new mechanisms for funding collaborative research among scientists from these countries. Further meetings, with broader representation, are planned for the near future.



Plenary Speakers at the Opening Session of the Africa Materials Research Society (MRS-Africa) inaugural meeting included (left to right) Aboubaker Chédikh Beye (University Cheikh Anta Diop [UCAD] Dakar and chair of the organizing committee), Anati Canca (National Research Foundation of South Africa), Alexander King (2002 President of the Materials Research Society), Robert Chang (General Secretary of the International Union of Materials Research Societies), Oumar Sock (Director, Polytechnic School, UCAD Dakar), and Stanley Israel (Member of the Board of the American Ceramic Society).

The technical program of the meeting was built around symposia on topics such as "Materials Education, Research, Management and Communications" and "Materials Infrastructure and Development." While the meeting was "MRS-like" in its interdisciplinary approach, the topics were also distinctly African in flavor, and the presentations demonstrated the continent's particular needs and capabilities in the area of materials science. Areas of particular interest are low-cost solar cell technologies, and the development of building materials based upon locally available resources. Especially in the latter area, a number of papers were presented in which high-tech approaches to composite materials that would be familiar in the developed nations have been applied to natural fibers, natural or artificial resins, or problematic though plentiful materials

such as Kalahari sand. While Africa is resource-rich in many areas, raw materials are often exported, converted into finished products, and then re-imported into Africa; and it is in the development of new manufacturing capabilities that many opportunities arise.

MRS-Africa holds great promise through its active regional chapters, and its focus on region-wide and continent-wide issues, rather than on national agendas. It also enhances the work of its individual members by providing a networking resource focusing upon the sharing of equipment. Most significantly, it has been created at a time of high economic potential in Africa, and may expect to contribute to economic growth and also benefit from it.

The next meeting of MRS-Africa will be in Johannesburg, in December 2003.

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