

REPORT

AFRICA GIS (October 31 to November 4, 2005)

Dr. Tsehaie Woldai

The AFRICAGIS 2005 Conference “Beyond Talk: Geo-information working for Africa.” (October 31 to November 4 2005 (see ANNEX 3) held at CSIR International Convention Centre, Tshwane (Pretoria), was hosted by the Geo-Information Society of South Africa (GISSA) and sponsored by the Program on Environmental Information Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa (EIS Africa), the African Association of Remote Sensing of the Environment (AARSE) and the African Organization for Cartography and Remote Sensing (AOCRS). The Polygon Sponsors of the conference include: the Department of Land Affairs and the Department of Science & Technology, South Africa, USAID, World Resource Institute (WRI), Statistics, South Africa, GIMS and ESRI

The AFRICAGIS '05 was organized to take people ‘beyond talking’ about what can be done with geo-information, and to explore and highlight what is being done with geo-information in Africa. In five days, the conference participants made it clear with real examples of where geo-information had made an impact on people’s lives, through more effective geo-information management and utilisation in Africa, particularly through support to local development efforts.

In the core themes of the conference, local-level applications of geo-information to planning and development; equitable access to, and effective use of resources and basic services; and the vulnerability of populations to, and mitigation of disasters; incidence and management of diseases; poverty reduction projects at community level and the improvement of local development planning and governance, through the sharing of information resources at local level were explored.

The conference also explored global issues and initiatives that impact on the development and application of geo-information in Africa. Achievements in the area of geo-information were also assessed in the global context. Partnership approaches which have contributed to the development of geo-information and its impact on the developmental agenda was also emphasized

Various people gave a welcoming speech during the opening of the conference; among them, Dr. Pali Lehohla, Chief Statistician General; Dr. Rob Adams, Director General of the Department of Science and Technology; Mr. Wilhem Herbst, Chairman of GISSA; Dr. Chris Volk, LOC Chairman; Mr. Andre Bassole, Chairman of EIS Africa; Dr. Tsehaie Woldai, President of AARSE and Prof. Ian Dowman, President of ISPRS. Each and every speaker indeed underscored the importance of the conference and the significance being attached to Geo-information working in Africa. The conference was officially opened by Dr. Nozizwe Makgalewele, representing Her Excellency the Minister Madame Thoko Didiza, the Minister for Land Affairs. In her speech, Dr. Makgalewele emphasized the importance of the Conference and the significance being given by the Government of South. She sited a critical review of Geoinformation drive in Africa and in particular South Africa and the hurdles that are confronting many organizations involved in this technology. Her talk focus was not only directed at assessing the current sustainable development problems in Africa, but also on how the benefits of Geographic Information Systems, GDI as well as the improved communications technology can be harnessed to provide the fundamental basis for sustainable development in Africa. With her 15 minutes speech to the conference audience, Dr. Nozizwe Makgalewele declared the Conference open and visited the exhibitions. The conference plenary technical sessions (see Annex) started in the afternoon under the chairmanship of Woldai.

The Conference sessions brought together some of the major Geoinformation initiatives being implemented in Africa covering themes such as:

- Geoinformation and integrated disaster risk management
- Spatial data infrastructure in Africa: the way forward
- Geo-demographics and business geographics and
- Partnership in Geo-information and Development

The conference in its entirety was well organized and administered. Except for the first day registration (where it was a little bit chaotic, because every one wanted to be registered on site), the LOC left no room for complaints. The technical plenary and oral presentations were by all standards professional; presented in time and for the whole conference period full. The Conference Proceedings was distributed in a CD-ROM with guidelines concerning the presentations and the exhibitions supplied in a separate booklet. Our South African partners worked very hard to place South Africa at a very high scientific level, lining up some heavyweights institutions behind the program and bringing many South African organizations in the exhibition. One issue for concern was that the input of EIS Africa was subdued and it was evident to see that they had little control of the situation. Most of the participants and nearly 80% of the papers originated from

inside South Africa and it seems as usual, EIS Africa has done little to bring wider African participations from the rest of the continent.

The Conference participants a day before registration amount to 404. By day 4, around 800 people registered. Additional 100 are known to have registered for only 1-2 days only. Almost 70% of the applicants are from South Africa with approximately 16% from other African countries representing 25 countries. The largest group of participants from outside the continent comes from North America followed by Europe and Asia. The conference involved (more details with Woldai if necessary):

- More than 144 oral presentations in 4 parallel sessions
- 6 Technical Plenary Sessions (with 3 Key note speakers per session)
- 3 pre-conference workshops
- 3 Parallel workshops per day (Total = 27)
- 4 business meetings
- 1 panel discussion
- 58 exhibitors
- few poster sessions
- 5 Technical tours

All submitted papers were presented, with few exceptions. Presentation time was 15 minutes focusing on the main points of each paper, with extra 5 minutes for discussions. The presentations gave valuable and detailed information and were mature in many aspects. The proceedings of the conference, including the invited papers were distributed on registration. In spite of the long conference daily duration (up to 6:00p.m. sometimes), the attendance was very high, constant to the workshop end, and discussions were lively.

The opening cocktail party allowed a better social interaction and fruitful discussions. The Gala conference dinner accompanied by various South African music performers at the Amphitheatre, Monument Function Centre in Pretoria on Thursday (the 3rd of November) was by all standards sensational and was arranged by the local organizing committee and attended by many of the participants.

Apart from other business gathering, three meetings were conducted:

1. AARSE Executive Council meeting – Discussed the development of the 6th AARSE Conference in Cairo, the association new logo, AARSE finances, AARSE relations with ISPRS, new links and partnerships.
2. AARSE-ISPRS joint council meeting – Past disappointment from AARSE side was raised; strategy for future collaboration between the two organizations was discussed and agreement reached. The discussion was highly fruitful and rather stimulating. The President of ISPRS has made it clear that AARSE will be his organization's main partner in the continent and many issues were raised and agreed to streamline our activities in future. ISPRS will co-sponsor future AARSE Pre-conference Workshops and ISPRS will jointly organize education and training initiatives in Africa with AARSE. The first such course is planned in UN-ECA next year.
3. IOC meeting and the EIS Africa annual gathering – the IOC meeting was to select the host of the next AFRICAGIS Conference. Burkina Faso (out of 3 who applied) was selected by the IOC to host the 2007 AfricaGIS. The EIS-Africa annual gathering reviewed the performance of the organization and elected new members to its Board. In the closing ceremony, call was made to the next African Association of Remote Sensing of the Environment (AARSE) conference in Cairo in October