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Title: SA well on track in SKA bid

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Pretoria - Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor says South Africa is well on track to hosting the world's largest telescope, the Square Kilometer Array (SKA).

According to Pandor, if South Africa wins the bid, Africa as a whole stands to benefit economically and also stands a chance of attracting the world's best scientists to Africa.

South Africa is competing with Australia in hosting the SKA.

Addressing the National Press Club in Pretoria on Friday, Pandor said the project will attract highly accomplished researchers and will significantly strengthen the existing astronomy science achievements in SA. It will also create a first class hub for astronomy in Africa.

"The global astronomy community has already shown great interest in collaborating with the development of the MeerKAT and in observing with it," she said.

"MeerKAT will be the Southern Hemisphere's largest radio telescope and one of the world's biggest and most powerful telescopes."

The SKA is a multibillion rand international radio telescope that will be between 50 and 100 times more sensitive than any instrument ever built in Africa.

South Africa has partnered with several other African countries - Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia and Zambia - in the bid to host the SKA.

If South Africa wins the bid, it stands to gain international recognition in the fields of Science and Technology.

According to Pandor, the construction of the project is expected to begin in 2016 and be completed in 2025.

In preparation for the bid, South Africa is building the MeerKAT in Carnarvon in the Northern Cape.

MeerKAT is South Africa's precursor telescope to the SKA and will consist of 64 dishes, each 13.5m in diameter.

The African Union endorsed the SKA bid at the 15th AU Summit of Heads of State in Uganda last year.

Throwing its weight behind Africa's bid to host the SKA, the heads of state stressed the SKA's importance for the growth of science, technology and innovation in the region and called on Africa's development partners and the global scientific community to support Africa's bid.

"Developing large-scale astronomy facilities such as the MeerKAT and the SKA can become a powerful driver of socio-economic development in the region," Pandor said.

South African universities are also playing a role in hosting the SKA. Students from various universities have been offered opportunities to conduct research on the project.

According to Pandor, the SKA is attracting young people into science and engineering and training a new generation of highly qualified scientists, technicians and professionals.

"Expanding the number of Africa's scientists and technicians will allow South Africa and Africa to play an increasingly important role in the global knowledge and technology economy," the minister said. - BuaNews