

Statement by the Minister of Science and Technology, Mrs Naledi Pandor, MP, on the Square Kilometre Array radio telescope bid, at the Press Club, Pretoria

4 Mar 2011

Good morning and thank you to the Chairperson of the National (well the Pretoria) Press Club, Mr Yusuf Abramjee and the executive for affording us an opportunity to address you on Africa's South African-led bid to host the Square Kilometre Array radio telescope, or SKA. As you are aware, Africa and Australasia have been shortlisted to host the SKA, and the final decision will be announced by the International Steering Committee on the SKA in 2012.

Let me begin by providing you with a few pointers on why Africa is bidding to host the SKA.

The African bid to host the SKA is led by South Africa and includes eight partner countries (Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia and Zambia). Construction is expected to begin in 2016 and be completed by 2025.

As a "pathfinder" radio telescope, South Africa is building the MeerKAT in Carnarvon. MeerKAT will be the Southern Hemisphere's largest radio telescope and one of the world's biggest and most powerful telescopes. The global astronomy community has already shown great interest in collaborating with the development of the MeerKAT and in observing with it. The first five years of the MeerKAT's life have already been allocated to 10 major international observing programmes.

We believe SKA is an important project for several reasons, we will create a global scientific instrument, we will attract highly accomplished researchers and we will significantly strengthen our existing astronomy science achievements and create a first class hub for astronomy in Africa.

The African Union endorsed the SKA bid at the 15th AU Summit of Heads of State in Uganda last year. In throwing its weight behind Africa's bid to host the Square Kilometre Array, the heads of state of the African Union 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. The benefits will be through human capital development, infrastructure. Telescope construction and Infrastructure layout will generate construction employment in South Africa and the African partner countries.

The African SKA human-capital development programme has since 2005 awarded 293 grants for postgraduate and undergraduate study in physics, astronomy and engineering, as well as for technician and artisan training. It has created five research chairs at South African universities. Since 2005, we have spent about \$15m / R110 million on our human capital programme. The African 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 budget for building the SKA will be comprised of contributions from a consortium of global partners to build a €1.5 billion (R14.3 billion today) telescope network. The host – either South Africa or Australia – will attract a substantial part of the €150 - 200 million a year for 30 to 40 years in expenses related to operations and maintenance of the SKA.

In conclusion, I urge you to support our bid through giving us a platform we can use to market our project and ensure that South Africa fully supports SKA.

Thank you.

Issued by: Department of Science and Technology
4 Mar 2011