

Unconference session at the IAU General Assembly 2015

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Abstract. The Astronomy For Development Focus Meeting 20 at the IAU General Assembly encompassed an ‘Unconference’ session as part of the proceedings. Unstructured conferences, with their potential to unleash innovative ideas, are gaining traction in various conferences and symposia. Astronomy For Development is a field that is applicable to the entire Astronomy community (and even beyond) and hence an unconference inviting ideas and fostering frank dialogue is very pertinent.

Officially one of the final sessions of the the 2015 General Assembly, the unconference session was intended to provide a balanced platform for a diverse set of participants and act as an informal setting to promote open discussion on topics of relevance to Astronomy for Development.

Keywords. miscellaneous, sociology of astronomy, Unconference, Inclusion, Diversity, Evidence, Evaluation, Translation

1. Introduction

An unconference is a non-traditional conference that is loosely structured, allowing for an informal exchange of ideas. One was held for the first time at the IAU General Assembly 2015. True to the nature of such a gathering, there were no pre-defined topics. Rather, for a week before the session, members of the IAU and other conference participants were encouraged to suggest issues of concern to Astronomy for Development, which were then displayed publicly at the Office of Astronomy for Development (OAD) booth. The topics were loosely assembled under different themes such as “Inclusion & Diversity”, “Education”, “Outreach”, “Evidence & Evaluation”, “Light pollution”, “Translation & Localisation”, “Volunteering”, and “Interdisciplinary & Partnerships”. Visitors then engaged in anonymous polling to choose the most interesting topics for discussion at the unconference.

2. Themes and Topics

A brief summary of each of the eight themes and the corresponding topics proposed follows.

2.1. *Inclusion & Diversity*

A subject of significant importance, inclusion and diversity are hot topics in and out of the Astronomy world. Topics that were suggested addressed the issue of diversity in the Astronomy community and the contribution of Astronomy-for-Development in furthering the inclusion goal.

2.2. *Education*

Education has a direct connection to the Astronomy for Development agenda. Conference participants were keen to discuss transfer of practical skills to communities using Astronomy as well as running specialized workshops for teachers.

2.3. *Outreach*

Outreach activities, very popular in Astronomy and related areas, have the potential to be crowd-pleasers as well as serious instruments in using Astronomy for Development. Proposed topics focused on the differing objectives of such activities and the measurable benefits of outreach to all parties involved.

2.4. *Evidence & Evaluation*

Evidence collection and evaluation are essential to learn the best methods and practices. The need to tap into the growing body of evidence from other fields of research was highlighted to be paramount in Astronomy for Development.

2.5. *Light pollution*

Light pollution is a major hurdle for Astronomy observations. But protecting our shrinking dark skies need not necessarily hold back development. The main issue tackled how combating light pollution goes hand in hand with Astronomy for Development.?

2.6. *Translation & Localisation*

Suggested topics included the difference in approach to Astronomy for Development work necessitated by the contexts of language, culture and region and translation of resources for different regions.

2.7. *Volunteering*

Managing and engaging volunteers and running internship programs for Astronomy for Development were the major topics of concern.

2.8. *Interdisciplinary & Partnerships*

The proposed topics tackled collaboration with development agencies and using insights from other fields such as cognitive sciences.

3. **Unconference session**

A total of three topics were chosen according to the votes coupled with the discretion of the organizers who took into account relevance and degree of importance of the topic. Participants at the unconference each selected one of the topics below, moderated by experts in the respective fields.

Evidence and Evaluation: Moderator(s) - Eli Grant, Linda Strubbe

Inclusion and Diversity: Moderator(s) - Beatriz Garcia

Translation and Localisation: Moderator(s) - Sze-Leung Cheung

A summary description of the discussion in the three groups follows.

Evidence and Evaluation

The importance of conducting assessment and evaluation of Astronomy for Development activities was highlighted. It helps identify the most effective and efficient processes to reach a certain outcome. Astronomy for Development is as much a domain of Astronomy as development. So, it is necessary to engage and collaborate with the development community as well as utilize research findings from other fields.

Inclusion and Diversity

Diversification has been an ongoing exercise in all areas of science and technology and has been given importance by the IAU. Discussions revolved around the potential of

Astronomy-for-Development to target and inspire a wider section of society to participate in technological innovation.

Translation and Localisation

The Astronomy for Development movement has spread across the globe with nine regional offices established on four continents. A global presence demands translation of resources, activities, best practices and news across languages. The discussion group touched on the merits and demerits of free translation services such as Google Translate and the urgent need for better software. In addition, volunteer translators need to be used to improve performance of such software with an appropriate reward system in place. The case of scientific terminology translating to exotic or obscure terms in certain languages is an example where knowledgeable human translators are required. The group recommended the creation of a website or other platform that could be used to send and receive translation requests as the foundation for further efforts in this area.

4. Conclusion

The first Astronomy for Development unconference session was reasonably well-attended. Recommendations from the participants included organizing a longer unconference session with more lead time for discussions.