

OR take-off in West Africa?

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During 5-7 January 2003 the First African Conference on Operational Research (ACOR 1) took place in Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso in West Africa. About 50 researchers and postgraduate students representing 20 countries (mainly from West, Central and North Africa) participated in ACOR 1. The conference, the first of its kind in West Africa, was funded by EURO (the Association of European Operational Research Societies), IFORS (the International Federation of Operational Research Societies), and the Belgian Government. The Operational Research Society, Palgrave and Blackwell, who have offered electronic subscriptions to JORS, International Abstracts in OR (IAOR) and International Transactions in OR (ITOR) to African institutions represented at the conference, also gave support.

The chair of the scientific was Prof. Jacques Teghem from Belgium's University of Mons who also represented the Belgian Government Cooperation in Burkina Faso. (Jacques is also an editor of the European Journal of Operational Research). Alexis Tsoukias (EURO Secretary, University of Paris 6, France) represented EURO. IFORS was represented by Graham Rand (former vice-president and currently publications co-ordinator, Lancaster University) and David Smith (Editor-in-Chief of IAOR, University of Exeter). Another UK university was represented by Eric Soubeiga (University of Nottingham), who is originally from Burkina Faso. A mixture of tutorials and scientific contributions were delivered during the conference, in both French and English. These covered theoretical aspects of OR, with methodology and a few applications.

The conference was supported by the University of Ouagadougou, and was covered by the local press, radio and television. We wondered why, with daytime temperatures in the 30's, and no rain likely for months, the TV cameraman turned up in a knee-length mackintosh!

Beyond the scientific aspect, however, a number of important discussions were held in order to promote the development of operational research in Africa. At present, there is an established national society in South Africa and fledgling groups in some North African countries. So we discussed:

1 - The creation of the West African Operational Research Society, to bring together OR researchers and practitioners from western and central African countries. Professors Blaise Some (University of Ouagadougou) and Pauline Fotso (University of Yaounde 1, Cameroon) have been appointed to coordinate the setting up of the society over the next few months. (It is hoped that a conference in Kenya in September will act as a catalyst to create a similar OR society in East Africa and the region of Great Lakes (Rwanda, Burundi, and Democratic Republic of Congo)).

2 - Under the Framework of EURO's African Project, EURO will provide funding for an Africa-wide teaching scheme within which OR specialists from Europe and North Africa will help with the teaching of OR modules in African universities. This will help re-inforce the creation of two centres of excellence in OR including one at the University of Ouagadougou where a doctoral programme in OR is being put in place. The scheme will also allow for the organisation of internships for African students and researchers in European Universities and internships for European students and researchers in African universities. The teaching scheme is due to start from academic year 2003/2004. Alexis Tsoukias and Serigne Gueye (University of Avignon, France) will conduct a survey of existing African institutions which teach OR.

3 - In order to coordinate OR activities in Africa, it is hoped that eventually there will be single country OR Societies and African regional societies which will be able to communicate through an African OR Network. A web site and a mailing list will be created in order to facilitate that communication. Eric Soubeiga has been appointed to create and maintain the web site and the mailing list. The African OR Network's web site will be hosted by the EURO web site.

So there seems to be a lot of work to do in order to implement all this. If these decisions are implemented then ACOR 1 will mark an important step in the history of OR in Africa. Time will tell...

To arrange a conference like this needs great confidence and a flexible mind. Delegates didn't arrive when expected, due to the vagaries of flights and conditions on the roads from neighbouring countries. The programme of presentations was an example of dynamic, rather than static scheduling. Of course, the whole event ran on "African time".

Some of the delegates were able to go sight-seeing; the capital's huge market was close by, and along the edges of the streets were stalls selling many items that are not usually found on sale here; "First class used motor oil" was available from several. There was a jazz concert with saxophone and African drums. Graham and David joined the pastor of one of the churches to visit a relief programme that is supported from the UK, and their hosts presented them with several live chickens as a token of gratitude. (ORS conference organisers, please note – a gift like that will be a change from a conference mug!)

And now the planning has started for ACOR 2...



The three authors with Professor Pauline Fotso







