



Title: Impact of Science on Development: Shining the light on Astronomy

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Abstract:

Astronomy has played an important role in shaping our understanding of the universe and our place in it, especially since our identity as the human race is in one way or another tied to the stars. Like other science disciplines, the impact of astronomy on development is not clear cut. In recent times, the role of astronomy in socio-economic development on the home base (Earth) and the difficulty in measuring this 'role' have been brought into the spotlight - leading to the establishment of the Office of Astronomy for Development (OAD) of the International Astronomical Union (IAU).

Put simply, the OAD's mandate [guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)] is to work on translating astronomy into development related outcomes mainly via project funding and other activities. While measuring the development impact of science is fraught with many challenges, obtaining perspectives is less daunting but equally important. Hence a diverse team of OAD fellows visited Sutherland [a town in Northern Cape, South Africa that hosts the Southern Africa Large Telescope (SALT)] in June 2019 to seek some community perspectives and qualitatively assess the impact of the SALT telescope on local socio-economic development.

This article discusses some problems in measuring the impact of science on development and presents some community and stakeholder perspectives from Sutherland. Among other things, the study shows that the South African Astronomical Observatory (SAAO)'s Sutherland Observatory has positively impacted local socio-economic development in the town through creation of jobs and its diverse outreach activities. The study also recommends different ways in which the observatory can further use astronomy to leverage socio-economic development in Sutherland, and improve its relations with the local communities. These include ensuring that the science community understands development from the perspective of the community and that the latter do not perceive science (including facilities like astronomical observatories) as out of reach.