



AT THE UN, A NEW VOICE FOR SCIENCE

Four TWAS Fellows have been named to a new, high-profile scientific commission that will help the United Nations integrate science into policy on a range of important issues.

 by Cristina Serra

The United Nations has formed a new Scientific Advisory Board to provide high-caliber advice to Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and to create direct connections between the global research community and other top UN organizations and policymakers.

Twenty-six internationally leading scientists from 25 nations – including four TWAS members – were named to the new board, which is part of a broader UN strategy to integrate science in international policymaking.

Advisers were chosen because of their scientific accomplishments and vision, with the aim of having representatives in all the fields where scientific advice is needed.

TWAS is well represented on the panel. Four elected Fellows – scientists from Asia, Latin America, the Arab world, including a Nobel laureate from Egypt – have wide expertise in both science and diplomacy. They are:

- Ahmed Zewail, from Egypt, a Nobel laureate in chemistry, Linus Pauling professor of chemistry and physics and director of the Center for Physical Biology at the California Institute of Technology.
- Brazilian climate expert Carlos Nobre, a senior scientist at the Brazilian national secretary for R&D policies;
- Abdallah Daar, born in Tanzania, professor of public health at the University of Toronto, Canada;

- Abdul Hamid Zakri, science adviser to the Prime Minister of Malaysia and chair of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES);
What is promising about the new board is that, “for the first time in the history of the United Nations, the scientific community has a direct line to the Secretary-General,” said Zakri. “This has never happened before. We are given the opportunity to make a difference and we should not squander this opportunity.” Zakri is a professor emeritus at the National University of Malaysia.

“This Scientific Advisory Board is, fundamentally, about action,” said UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova, who chairs the board. Board members will offer advice on technical and scientific issues and ensure that scientific data are reflected in political discussions. They will identify knowledge gaps that, once properly addressed, could reshape the life of millions of people; they will also advise on issues related to the public visibility and understanding of science.

The panel held its first meeting in January in Berlin. It will meet twice a year to address key issues, but between meetings, the scientists will team up in sub-groups to prepare reports for the UN Secretary-General. UNESCO will host the board and its staff.

TWAS President Bai Chunli, who also serves as president of the Chinese Academy of



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▼ TWAS President
Bai Chunli





Sciences, expressed strong support for the new UN advisory committee. The panel “reflects a recognition that many of the challenges facing humanity today are global challenges in which science should play a constructive role,” Bai said. “This board will have a great influence in the developing world, and we look forward to a close working relationship with our TWAS colleagues and other members of the board.”

Both genders are equally represented in the panel. Among its members are Italian physicist Fabiola Gianotti from CERN, who is among the discoverers of the Higgs boson; Nigerian Wole Soboyejo, president of the African University of Science and Technology; Judi Wakhungu, a professor of energy resources management and also first cabinet secretary at the Kenyan Ministry of Environment, Water and Natural Resources; and Susan Avery, president and director of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution [USA].

Board members will tackle global problems, including water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity, which often pose life-threatening challenges for million people worldwide.

Nobre, a Brazilian academic and a former chair of the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme, is a world-renowned expert on complex systems such as the Earth. As a climate scientist, he hopes he will be able to

▲ High-level officials gathered on stage for the inauguration ceremony of the Scientific Advisory Board of the UN Secretary-General.

bring forth the urgency of global action to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

“There is a serious misplaced psychological barrier to be overcome in considering, for example, the issue of climate change,” he said in an interview. “The truth is that transition to a sustainable economy is not as costly or difficult as it is perceived. The stalemate in climate negotiations is due to institutional inertia and not lack of climate science. Therefore, education for sustainability becomes as important an element for the global transformation need as implementation of green technologies.”

Words of praise for the scientific board came also from Zewail, who called it “... an excellent platform for an outreach to all the nations.” Zewail was awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1999, and his appointment to the new board reflects his long-standing experience and passion in global affairs related to science, education and peace.

“The truth is that transition to a sustainable economy is not as costly or difficult as it is perceived.” **Carlos Nobre**

Daar has extensive experience in matters at the interface between science and policy.

“With complex issues like these, it is not just one thing at a time that needs attention, it is usually many things together,” Daar said. “Primarily it is about building better health care systems, introducing things like universal health coverage and proper resourcing. But again, to implement all these, you need evidence, and that is where science comes in”.

“The Scientific Advisory Board is a very important new body,” said Romain Murenzi, the executive director of TWAS. “It reflects very well on TWAS’s elected membership that four of our members have been appointed to this panel. Our Academy looks forward to working with the board and to supporting its work however we can.”