

Renewed marine sciences collaboration between Kenya and Belgium

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On 19 October 2012 the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI) and the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding for bilateral collaboration in the field of marine sciences.

This agreement has the aim to promote partnership in the following areas:

- Development and execution of collaborative research projects between (1) KMFRI and its marine and coastal science network in Kenya, and (2) VLIZ and its marine and coastal science network in Flanders, Belgium.
- Undertaking joint field work, research expeditions, experiments, monitoring and observation programmes.
- Exchange of expertise and exchange of (1) faculty, research and academic staff, (2) technical experts (ICT specialists, data and information managers, marine technicians, nautical experts, communication specialists, etc.) and (3) students.
- Capacity building for research, technology development (incl. research vessels and navigational and sampling equipment), data management, and education.
- Exchange of data and information.
- Jointly producing derived products from research, data and information (e.g. joint scientific publications, communication and outreach products like websites, books, posters, multimedia, etc.).

An action plan to achieve these goals has been agreed upon by both parties and was added to the MoU as an annex. The action plan is a non-limitative and informal list of possible action points. It serves as a source of ideas for future collaboration and will be revised and updated annually.

Belgium and Kenya have a long tradition of collaboration in the marine sciences. This has to do with the 'Kenya-Belgium Project in Marine Sciences' or KBP. In the early eighties of the last century, realizing the importance of the world ocean, and the many services it provides to society, and recognizing that marine sciences are an essential enterprise in the development of a better world, the Belgian Government asked Professor Philip Polk to travel to Kenya and to investigate the possibilities of scientific collaboration. This mission resulted in the start of the 'Kenya-Belgium cooperation in Marine Sciences' in 1985. The KBP knew different successive phases that together ran continuously for more than 15 years, and it knew different simultaneous spin-off projects, with ramifications to any other European and East-African countries. The project was very successful. The scientific output was significant. Many Kenyans were trained in Belgium, obtained MSc and PhD degrees, and many Belgian students and professors visited Kenya for collaborative research. This has resulted in a community of people who know, respect and trust each other, and who have sometimes established long lasting friendships. Many of the people that were active in KBP as young scientists now have important positions in KMFRI, in VLIZ, in the universities or in the Flemish and Kenyan ministries, even in international organizations like IOC. This the strongest possible foundation to build upon. It's now up to this generation to transfer knowledge to a new generation of young Kenyans and Belgians, to create a new Kenya-Belgium marine science community.

Today there is still collaboration between Kenyan and Flemish institutes and individual researchers, but the efforts are now fragmented and we don't have an overview. We hope that this Memorandum of Understanding will provide a new 'umbrella', under which (1) all the ongoing collaborations can be clustered, (2) new collaborations can be established and (3) the profile and visibility of marine science collaboration in both countries and internationally can be increased. In parallel and in a first phase, the legacy of KBP will be mapped, rescued, documented and revived. This will constitute a solid basis for future collaboration. The MoU will be a catalyst for joint research projects and will lead to useful exchanges of data, information, expertise, staff and – above all – young people, the Kenyan and Belgian marine professionals of the future.

This is a call to all participants of the VLIZ Young Marine Scientists' Day 2013: you are warmly invited to explore the opportunities and to join this collaborative effort.