

COMSATS - An Inter-governmental Body of Developing Countries

Executive Director Sheds Light on its Programmes and Activities



An Exclusive Interview with Dr. Imtihan Elahi Qureshi, Executive Director COMSATS



The Executive Director COMSATS is a veteran physicist having over 30 years of experience in scientific research, teaching and administration. Before joining COMSATS about three years ago, he held the position of "Chief Scientist" in Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission. He was awarded Tamgha-i-Imtiaz in 2004 on the basis of scientific productivity in nuclear physics research. During three years of secondment at the Permanent Mission of Pakistan to the United Nations (2005 - 2008) he had the opportunity of interacting closely with a number of international organizations, based in Geneva. He talked to the 'Pakistan Observer' on the historic occasion of COMSATS' Commission Meeting (Islamabad, 16 - 17 April 2012) called by H. E. Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, in his capacity as the incumbent Chairperson of COMSATS.

What is COMSATS and why was it established?

The Commission on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in the South (COMSATS) was established in 1994 as an inter-governmental organization to help developing member countries in addressing their socio-economic problems through the application of science and technology. COMSATS has 21 member countries located in three continents: Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The Secretariat of COMSATS is permanently located in

Islamabad. The Commission Members are the Heads of State/Government of member countries, while the Prime Minister of Pakistan is its current Chairperson. COMSATS was the realization of a grand vision of the Pakistani Nobel Laureate, Prof. Dr. Abdus Salam, whereby the developmental gap between the North and the South was to be bridged through S&T capacity-building in developing countries. Dr. Salam firmly believed that "this globe of ours is inhabited by two distinct species of human beings: the developed and the developing,

the rich and the poor. What distinguishes one type of human from the other is the ambition, the power, the élan, which basically stems from their differing mastery and utilization of present day science and technology". He had earlier established the 'International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP)' in Trieste (Italy) as an institution providing world-class infrastructure to scientists from the developing countries, who are often isolated and lack adequate facilities necessary for high-quality research in their home countries.

What is the Mission and major objectives of COMSATS?

The mission statement of COMSATS is "to help create a world where all nations/states are at peace with each other and capable of providing a good quality of life to their populations in a sustainable way, using modern scientific and technological means".

The major objectives of COMSATS, as outlined in its Foundation Agreement are to: i) sensitize the countries of the South to the centrality of science and technology in the development process, to the adequate allocation of resources for research and development, and to the integration of science and technology in the national and regional development plans; ii) support the establishment of a Network of International Science and Technology Centres of Excellence for Sustainable Development in the South; iii) support other major initiatives designed to promote indigenous capacity-building in science and technology for science-led sustainable development, and to help mobilize long-term financial support from international donor agencies and from governments/institutions in the North and the South to supplement the financing of international scientific projects in the South; iv) provide leadership and support for major North-South and South-South cooperative schemes in education, training and research; and v) support the relevant programmes and initiatives of major international organizations working for the development and promotion of science and technology in the

South.

How does it function?

The structure of COMSATS goes a step further from the establishment of a single research facility catering to the training and research requirements of scientists from a large group of developing countries with a wide spectrum of research interests.

It envisioned clusters of high-quality R&D centres working independently in their national capacities but cooperating with one another as a part of COMSATS' Network of Centres of Excellence. Currently, 17 such Centres in different countries are affiliated with COMSATS and provide it an enormously rich resource for scientific cooperation. The list of these Centres is available on COMSATS' web-site (www.comsats.org).

The Heads of these Centres of Excellence are members of the COMSATS Coordinating Council, which holds its meetings in different countries on a yearly basis.

The Coordinating Council is a

potential benefits and risks.

How does COMSATS finance its activities and programmes?

COMSATS has limited financial resources to execute its programmes. It is not a funding agency. Its major contribution comes from the Government of Pakistan, which generously provides adequate funds to cover all establishment expenditure of COMSATS' Secretariat in Islamabad. Amongst the member countries making voluntary contributions, China is the biggest donor, which provides an annual grant on a regular basis.

The payments from all other countries are made on voluntary basis from time-to-time. In spite of its financial limitations, the organization has instituted a number of mechanisms to boost its funding requirements. First and foremost in this connection is the policy of organizing international capacity-building programmes in partnership with other international organizations, such as Pakistan

States/Governments at the highest level towards the importance of South-South and North-South cooperation in S&T for socio-economic development; and mobilizing adequate financial support for the scientific and technical programmes of COMSATS.

Further, the participation by the senior-level representatives of international organizations and donor agencies will open doors for wider cooperation, resource and experience-sharing with member countries, which is essential for the higher dynamism of an international organization like COMSATS. It is hoped that deliberations of the 2nd Commission Meeting, being held on April 16-17, 2012, in Islamabad, would facilitate COMSATS in achieving its organizational objectives, and result in the decisions, recommendations and resolutions that would lead to streamlining COMSATS' future activities aimed at the socio-economic development.

That is true. This is because soon after its inception, COMSATS launched these two projects for the benefit of host country, Pakistan. The phenomenal success of both these projects has somewhat overshadowed COMSATS' international activities.

The COMSATS Internet Services (CIS), started in 1996, was the pioneer of high-quality Internet access, while in 1998, COMSATS Institute of Information Technology (CIIT) was launched as an I.T. training Centre. The latter is now a public sector degree-awarding institute with close to 20,000 enrolled students, and almost 2,000 faculty members, more than 400 of which have Ph.D degrees. The Institute offers 63 degree programmes spread in seven Campuses across Pakistan. The quality of education can be judged by its ranking as the top-most institution of the country in the field of I.T. education, according to a report issued in 2012 by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. CIS is operating

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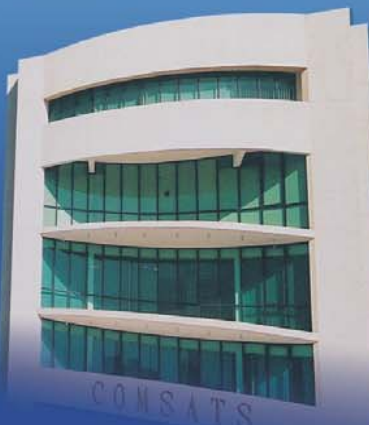
How does COMSATS see its future role?





COMSATS

- Entirely managed by the countries of the South;
- Fully committed to socio-economic progress of developing countries;
- Totally focused on S&T capacity building.



COMSATS gratefully acknowledges the support of the Government of Pakistan for holding its 2nd Commission Meeting and welcomes the member countries' delegates



Commission on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in the South (COMSATS)

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unique platform, which enables the leaders of R&D organizations to consult one another about the latest developments in their scientific programmes, learn from the best practices and successful initiatives, and, in general, exchange among each other the offers of cooperation and requests for technical assistance.

It was further realized by COMSATS' pioneers that the decision-making process in developing countries is heavily dependent upon political patronage and the cooperation of their governments.

Thus, an international initiative to make Science and Technology the central pillar of the development agenda in the countries of the South can be successful only by adopting a top-down approach to bring about significant shift in how countries perceive the role of S&T and what resources are allocated for its development.

Consequently, COMSATS acts as an apex body, comprising Heads of State/Government as its Members, while the highest level functionaries responsible for S&T affairs in member countries, acting as COMSATS' Focal Points, constitute its Consultative Committee.

How does COMSATS achieve its objectives and what are its major programmes?

In order to achieve its objectives, COMSATS has been using a variety of conventional and innovative mechanisms, over the last 17 years. The capacity-building at the level of individuals and institutions has been conducted through seminars, symposia, workshops, training programmes, pilot-projects and sponsorship of scientific visits. Over 160 national and international events have been organized in the specific areas of science and technology that have a direct relevance to the socio-economic development of the member countries.

The thrust areas identified in this context are: information and communication technologies; natural products, agriculture and biotechnology, climate change and environmental protection, material sciences, mathematical modeling, water resource management, and renewable energy technologies.

COMSATS keeps a close watch on scientific breakthroughs and emerging technologies to alert its Member States about their

Commission for UNESCO, ISESCO, NAM S&T Centre, and Academy of Sciences for the Developing World, in order to gain maximum benefits with limited monetary input. Significant in-kind contribution of member countries is received in the form of hospitality to visiting scientists, local organizational expenditures of international events and travel for participation in COMSATS related meetings.

All member countries, especially the host country of COMSATS' Secretariat, Pakistan, should be lauded for their commitment to the cause of COMSATS. However, there is a strong need of greater budgetary support to enhance the impact of COMSATS' international role.

What benefits do the member countries get from COMSATS?

The member countries can get a variety of benefits from COMSATS platform:

Some major benefits of joining COMSATS include: participation in COMSATS' policy-making meetings; participation in the joint technical cooperation projects under its programme of International Thematic Research Groups; sharing and exchange of experts and faculty; availing of postgraduate scholarships; availing short-term training opportunities in COMSATS' Centres of Excellence; possibility of support to the scientists, engineers and technicians for their participation in the international scientific moots; financial, technical and administrative support for co-organizing joint international and regional workshops; provision of consultancy services for the feasibility and implementation of technical projects in Member States; entitlement to receive COMSATS' publications (books, journal, newsletter, etc.) free of cost; and access to the electronic databases of COMSATS. The facilitation and support extended to member countries in S&T can be monitored through its website.

In Pakistan, the name COMSATS is generally associated with COMSATS Internet Services or with COMSATS Institute of Information Technology. How do these activities relate to COMSATS and its mandate?

The 21st Century is going to be a defining period for the destinies of rich and poor nations, and for planet earth itself. Applications of new and emerging technologies for addressing the existing and future socio-economic challenges of the member countries will play a crucial role for sustainable development and economic equity across the globe. The world population is heading towards a red-line of 10B, where the Earth's eco-system would be unable to sustain the mankind at its present level of consumption. COMSATS has achieved adequate experience over the past 17 years to provide its member countries the help and advice to build strong S&T capacity and infrastructure for their economic competitiveness on global level. COMSATS has devised a five-year strategy, the lynch-pin of which is a radically new initiative of conducting COMSATS' sponsored thematic research, in areas relevant to direct socio-economic benefits. This will complement COMSATS' role as a facilitator of scientific cooperation to a promoter of research in specific scientific and technical areas. During the last two years, three 'International Thematic Research Groups (ITRGs)' have been launched. This concept is based on extending the most common way modern research is conducted. Generally, there is always a senior professor as Group Leader with several students/post-doctorate or other co-workers as Group Members; all engaged in work on a well-defined theme of research. COMSATS' ITRGs are different only in the sense that the Group Leader is an outstanding international scientist in one of the member countries, while the Group Members are a combination of local and other scientific workers distributed in different countries interested in the project. The theme of the group activity and the size of the group are left to the discretion of the Group Leader. The three ITRGs currently undertaking research are in Thematic areas of: 'Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)'; 'Natural Products Sciences'; and 'Climate Change and Environmental Protection'. COMSATS would continue to strive for achieving its core mission of making S&T the driver of socio-economic progress in its Member States through all available means.

The 2nd meeting of the Commission is being held after 17 years. Wasn't there a need for the Commission to meet more often?

You are right. The Commissions' meetings should have been convened more frequently, especially in the last decade when COMSATS had progressed in its journey to cross several mile-stones related to its mission. However, despite several attempts, the meeting could not be arranged due to the persistent financial and security constraints. Nevertheless, the present Chairperson, Mr. Yusuf Raza Gilani, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, took keen interest in convening this meeting in 2012. There are a lot of important issues, which need deliberations and decisions at the Commission level for strengthening the role of this organization.

We have a heavy agenda for the meeting. We will try that, in future, the Commissions' meeting takes place after every three years.

What benefits or results are expected from this meeting?

The 2nd Commission Meeting of COMSATS, with participation of Science Ministers of member countries representing their Heads of State or Government, is being held with the objectives, inter alia, of: renewing the commitment of the member countries for participating in and supporting the programmes and initiatives of COMSATS; working out solid policy guidelines for the future functioning of the Commission; sensitizing the Member