

# Senegal dreams of 'African Einstein' with new science hub

September 10 2011, by Malick Rokhy BA

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A mathematics institute which opened in Senegal this week is the first step to creating a west African science centre, which backers hope could produce the continent's own Albert Einstein.

The institute is the second of its kind on the continent. It is modelled after the African Institute of Mathematics (AIMS) opened in Cape Town in 2003. This new institute sprang out of a larger research and education centre (Cirem).

Built on a site overlooking the sea in Mbour 80 kilometres (50 miles) southeast of Dakar) the centre is aimed at reviving basic and applied research in Africa, said Mamadou Sanghar, the director of AIMS-Senegal, at the launch on Tuesday.

The centres aim to train Africans to tackle many of the problems faced by the continent, such as climate change, [food insecurity](#) and infectious diseases, and use science and technology towards its own development.

Senegal's Higher Education Minister Amadou Tidiane Ba bemoaned the "weakness of high-level scientific and technological innovation" coming out of Africa.

The continent "produces only 1 percent of scientific articles and patents identified on the planet ... the challenge is to contribute to the gradual reversal of this trend," said Ba, who is also a researcher in [plant biology](#).

Tuesday's opening ceremony in Mbour was attended by 1985 Nobel physics prizewinner Klaus von Klitzing and Cedric Villiani, who won the prestigious Field Medal for mathematics in 2010.

"AIMS was created by scientists who want a Pan-African centre of excellence so that Africa can be a scientific leader," said South African physicist Neil Turok at the centre's inauguration. The project is very much his brainchild.

The institute was created by France's Institute for Development Research (IRD), the Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), with the support of the Senegalese government, and western research bodies.

It is intended to serve West and Central Africa.

The centre opens with 35 students from 14 African countries for masters-level education.

"The students are chosen among the best on the continent. They benefit from full support. Courses will be taught by professors from around the world," said Sanghare.

Over 360 students from 31 countries have already graduated from AIMS Cape Town.

These include Viateur Tuyisenge who lost his whole family in the Rwandan genocide. He has already studied computer science in France, the IDRC said.

Esra Khaleel from war-torn Darfur is doing a PhD in nuclear physics and wants to help solve South Africa's energy crisis, the Canadian centre said in a statement.

"We must use the momentum to go further. We all dream of an African Einstein," said Vincent Rivasseau of AIMS-Senegal, referring to the German scientific genius regarded as the father of modern physics.

The IRDC says some one million students graduate from African universities every year, but high-level training in scientific and technical fields is generally not available.

"Mathematical sciences are after all the backbone of the modern economy," said the centre.

The reduction of the scientific divide plaguing Africa "will not be overnight, (but) I think she will do great things in science in the coming decades," said Fields Medal winner Cedric Villani.

Klaus von Klitzing revealed that he had convinced Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade to support the project during a trip to the country two years ago.

"Other (developed) countries have invested heavily in education and knowledge. It is an absolute necessity," the physicist said.

AIMS plans to open 15 centres across the continent by 2020.

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