

Signing of SAFIPA agreement heralds new era of ICT activity

South Africa has received a boost in becoming an inclusive knowledge society through the signing of an intergovernmental agreement with Finland. This bodes well for a strong national information and communications technology (ICT) brand, which reflects research excellence and demonstrated improvements in quality of life and economic competitiveness.

The South Africa-Finland Knowledge Partnership on ICT (SAFIPA) intergovernmental agreement was signed by the Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Mosibudi Mangena, and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in July 2007. The programme will be implemented by the Meraka Institute (managed by the CSIR) and its core activities will receive funding from the Department of Science and Technology and the Finnish government. The programme is expected to start early in 2008 and run for three years.



SAFIPA supports the creation of an environment that facilitates the development and deployment of ICT applications for the benefit of South African citizens. The programme addresses the creation and delivery models of ICT-based services that are suitable for local conditions, especially for the most vulnerable groups within the South African population.

Commenting on SAFIPA's objectives, the Meraka Institute's Sherrin Isaac highlights institutional and human capacity development as an important component. "SAFIPA will strengthen the Meraka Institute's structured mentorship programme and create a platform for exchange programmes between South African and Finnish institutions engaged in applied R&D." Other important objectives are the development of innovative service applications and the deployment of these, and the creation of networks and partnerships.

The SAFIPA programme forms part of a cluster of partnership programmes with Finland, of which the Cooperation Framework on Innovation Systems between Finland and South Africa (COFISA) is singled out as the flagship project. A mechanism for learning from the Finnish innovation system, COFISA aims to strengthen South Africa's National System of Innovation and focuses on institutional skills and capacity development, instead of infrastructure development. (The Meraka Institute is also involved in COFISA's management.)

To avoid duplication and create synergies, SAFIPA will link with COFISA and other South African-Finnish partnership programmes such as capacity building of the Southern African Network for Biosciences (SANBIO) and the Provincial Information Strategy Development Programme (INSPIRE), which will help to build provincial information societies, starting with Limpopo and the Northern Cape.

In partnership with the Embassy of Finland, the Meraka Institute has participated in several smaller ICT and innovation-related project initiatives, which have served to provide a platform and networking opportunity for Finnish and South African institutions. These include the Project on Partnership and Information Society Collaboration for Disability to encourage networking between organisations with expertise on accessibility; the Women in Science, Engineering and Technology project to explore mechanisms to stimulate the increased participation of women in ICT and the Mobile Phones in Formal and Informal Learning project in developing countries.

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Tel: + 27 12 841 2911, technical enquiries: + 27 12 841 2000, fax: +27 12 349 1153, web site feedback: [web team](#)