

Henri van Regemorter: genesis of the IGPD

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Our colleague and friend Henri Van Regemorter, a French CNRS fellow attached to the Paris Observatory (Meudon, France) passed away last November. An active member of EPS since its beginning, his main contribution to the EPS action is the co-foundation in 1984 of the Interdivisional Group Physics for Development (IGPD), successively chaired by E. Lillethun (Norway), L. Hasselgreen (Sweden), A. Suzor-Weiner (France) and presently by M. Chergui (Switzerland). Two of these chairpersons describe the contribution of Henri to the IGPD action.

The beginning by E. Lillethun

I met Henri first in Istanbul, in September 1981, where he was chairing a meeting of the Advisory Committee on Physics and Society, following a seminar on "Physics in Developing Countries in Europe," the first attempt of EPS to discuss the peculiar difficulties of training and research in some Southern European countries. We kept contact now and then, and met again at a conference in Trieste, in 1984, together with Prof. M. Tomak, from Turkey. During the same week there was a workshop for mathematics and physics teachers/researchers from Africa. Both Henri and I were interested in sitting in, listening to their discussions.

The participants returned again and again to the questions: "Why do we have to get to Europe to meet each other?" and "How can we build up our strength at home in Africa? Coming to conferences, workshops, courses in Europe is interesting, but when we come back home we are isolated and without any infrastructure needed for continued research. We have hardly one periodical and very little experimental equipment."

These questions struck a chord with both Henri and me, and we started discussing how we, European physicists, could help our colleagues from developing countries. Of course, the ICTP in Trieste was already doing a wonderful job, but we thought that EPS could bring something specific, not in terms of budget but of solidarity. Together with M. Tomak we discussed possible methods for starting an EPS committee to help the physicists and mathematicians in developing countries. Henri had been the President of a French "Committee for Scientific and Technical Cooperation with Vietnam" from about 1975, and therefore had experience of the needs and ways to help.

Henri, Mehmet and I went back to our universities and worked on the proposal for creating the IGPD which was approved by the EPS Executive Committee in October 1984, and by the Council of EPS on 23 March 1985. Soon a board was elected, and met about once a year, often in Paris where Henri was very helpful in providing free meeting rooms and cheap accommodation!

The first action of IGPD was to organize in 1988 a "Workshop for Planning of Network Projects in Materials Science and Solar Energy," in Nairobi (Kenya). Henri was one of the most active members of the International Programme Committee, and he formulated the Declaration from the workshop.

In 1988 I started a project for cooperation between a Norwegian university group and Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. My IGPD archive since 1988 has therefore become less organised, but I can still describe the implementation of another idea of Henri, the series of "Southern Europe Schools of Physics."

The Southern Europe School of Physics by E. Lillethun and A. Suzor-Weiner

Henri came with the idea that EPS should organize physics schools in Southern Europe, considered at the time a developing region, to train young physicists locally. He wanted the level to be high but adapted to the needs of the audience, and the school to be hosted by a local institute or university which would benefit from the contact with physics professors from all Europe, and young researchers from other European developing countries.

The pioneer school was run by G. Delgado, presently in the EPS Executive Committee, on "Dynamical Processes in Molecular Physics" in Spain, in 1991. Schools have been held in various domains of physics, at different universities or physics centres, every two or three years depending on funding opportunities. A school on lasers was organized in 1995 by S. Fotakis and the Laser Center in Heraklion (Crete). The next was on solar cells in Portofino (Italy), organized by I. Solomon in 1998, and more recently we had an excellent school on medical physics in the University of Algarve (Portugal), organized in 2001 by Prof. M. Abreu, still a member of the IGPD board.

Although organized by various colleagues and under various chairs of IGPD, these schools were closely followed by Henri who always insisted on their training sessions, and on adapting the level to the young attendees. Many came from Eastern countries, making interesting connections between Eastern and Southern Europe. More researchers from Northern Africa also obtained grants to attend.

From Southern Europe to South of Europe by A. Suzor-Weiner

When Henri, my former thesis advisor, proposed my name as a possible chairperson of IGPD in 1994 I was tempted by the challenge but did not know EPS, except for the ECAMP conference in my research domain. I was soon able to work effectively due to constant help from G. Thomas, the EPS Secretary General and a good friend of Henri, and generous support from J. Lewis, the EPS treasurer. I found EPS very receptive to the specific problems of physics in developing countries, both in Europe and outside, and I established fruitful connections with the Action Committee for Physics and Society and the IG for Physics and Education. A task force was created in 1996 dealing with the specific problems of young researchers in the former Eastern block. The IGPD could then look further south, to strengthen the links of EPS and European physicists with colleagues in the third world. The actions went from supporting attendees from North Africa to our Southern Europe schools, to organizing a workshop on "Spectroscopy and Applications" in Dakar (Senegal) in 2001, with the support of UNESCO and in collaboration with APS. Henri had strong connections with physicists in Dakar (such as Prof. A. Wague) and he helped in the selection of participants and teachers. Besides the scientific information, this workshop established some sustained collaborations between African and European teams.

Throughout the years, Henri's impact for opening EPS to support physics and physicists in difficult environments, inside or outside Europe, was constant, effective, and an example to younger colleagues.