



Dear Colleagues,

It is my utmost honor to address you today as NAMES Executive Director, having worked with my dear mentor, whose support and guidance are as always of the essence, Ms. Hoda Elmikaty, Deputy Director of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, on the initiation of NAMES more than ten years ago. I have since served as NAMES Secretary, working on the Network's development with Ms. Elmikaty, as well as a diverse group of highly esteemed colleagues from across the NAMES region.

Before I go into the details of our challenges, strengths, and future plans, I must first give due tribute to two significant figures that, not only helped establish and reinforce NAMES, but have also been true sources of inspiration and support to me. The first is the dear late Mr. Mijbil Almutawa; his charisma and determination rooted NAMES both regionally and internationally; his acuity and fortitude sharpened my resolve. The second is the truly inspirational Ms. Sawsan Dalaq; her clarity and conviction of vision motivates me to end; thanks to her, NAMES has bloomed into maturity and steps strongly into its second decade.

My gratitude is by no means extended to my revered leaders alone, but to everyone I have ever worked with along the way and, therefore, learnt from; more especially to valuable coworkers, without whom one may not fully succeed. In my case, great acknowledgement is due to my valued colleague, Ms. Rehab Elawamry. For five years, she has grown with the Network, to whom she is fully devoted; she has been a critical aid on all levels and, step by step, her role is expanding; to me, she is the future of NAMES.

It has been a long and challenging journey from the very beginning. Science Centers had already existed worldwide for decades when they first started to emerge in North Africa and the Middle East with the dawn of the millennium. Only three Science Centers in the NAMES region opened to the public between 2000 and 2002; The Scientific Center of Kuwait, Tunis Science City, and the Planetarium Science Center at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

It was during annual conferences of regional science centers' networks that the three came to learn about each other; they soon realized the need to come together with other existing science centers or initiatives in the region. NAMES was, hence, inception early in 2006 in Alexandria and established later the same year in Tunis with five Founding Members, including Turkey Science Centers Foundation and Sultan Ibn Abdulaziz Science & Technology Center from Saudi Arabia.

Throughout the first five years of NAMES' existence, the region witnessed a slow rise of science centers and other science communication entities in the region; yet, the first two NAMES Biennial Conferences were great successes. NAMES 2008 and NAMES 2010 were true testaments to the significance of NAMES, bringing together hundreds of representatives from both the region and worldwide.

The following five years, more entities came into existence, but political and economic turbulence was a tremendous challenge; yet, not only did NAMES survive, it grew with memberships doubling. Adversity strengthened our resolve and we have had our most successful conference in 2016, marking our 10 Years Anniversary. On the occasion, with the Secretariat Office's direction towards better, more enhanced visibility of the Network and better services to Members, we revamped our identity, signifying our growth and maturity; our communication portals and tools followed suit.

We begin the new decade of NAMES by reinforcing our infrastructure; hence, the Board of Directors' decision to appoint an Executive Director to help future Presidents and Board Members take NAMES to the next level. The Board has also reevaluated and articulated memberships' criteria, aiming to align member recruitment efforts, while expanding the Network's reach and impact. In this new phase, NAMES Executive Team, comprising both Secretariat Office and Board of Directors, is focusing on collaborative projects and initiatives within members and with other networks.

We have come a long way, and a long way is still ahead of us; yet, with every step we take we move closer to realizing our mission of "Networking for a Better Future" and our vision of fostering cooperation between member institutions and individuals and maximizing upon available resources and experiences within the region. We look forward to seeing new Science Centers and other science communication initiatives and projects emerge in our region in the very near future, and we aspire to stand together and with them to democratize science throughout the region.

With my sincerest wishes to all our members and collaborators worldwide,

Maissa Azab