

# APS March Meeting Goes Overseas

The virtual component of this year's March Meeting was attended live by scientists at in-person satellite events in Africa, Asia, and South America.

By Katherine Wright

Numbers can deceive. According to the online viewership statistics, attendance was low for the session that Gihan Kamel helped organize for the American Physical Society's (APS's) virtual March Meeting. Just 15 connections were made to the virtual platform for the nine live talks presented by scientists from across the Middle East and West Africa. Other sessions held on the same day registered 6–75 connections. But those numbers provide only part of the story. Kamel—who works at the synchrotron facility SESAME in Jordan—says that the actual viewer count is at least 100, a number that factors in the speakers and the more than 75 scientists who gathered at SESAME to watch the talks and participate in a three-day in-person event that coincided with the virtual meeting.



Satellite meetings in several countries gave physicists the opportunity to virtually attend the APS March Meeting while also having in-person interactions.

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Similar types of satellite events also ran in Brazil, Rwanda, and South Africa. Hundreds of scientists gathered to present their work and network with colleagues in a way that was previously off-limits to many of them. Representatives from APS say that they have plans to make these satellite events more common, opening the benefits of in-person conference attendance—such as the ability to have extended, impromptu conversations about science—to those who would otherwise miss out. “The in-person March Meeting is one of the biggest gatherings of physicists on the planet, but there are many researchers who are excluded from coming to the conference for financial reasons or because of travel restrictions,” says Amy Flatten, the APS Director of International Affairs. “These [satellite] events allow people who have never attended a March Meeting to actively participate in the conference and not just passively watch.”

While the concept of a virtual conference has been around for years, they were few and far between until March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Overnight, talking at virtual events became the norm. Three years on, with COVID-19 restrictions lifted, interest in virtual-only events is waning. Today, online-only seminars and conferences typically see high signup numbers but low attendance, says Andrea Lausi the scientific director of SESAME and co-organizer of the institution's satellite event. He thinks that satellite conferences that bring geographically close scientists together in one room and then connect them virtually to others around the world could mitigate that declining interest.

For Lausi, satellite events offer the possibility for highly accessible global meetings that are inexpensive, have limited

environmental costs, and have social coffee breaks. The sentiment is echoed by Nathan Berkovits, the director of the ICTP South American Institute for Fundamental Research in Brazil and the organizer of the Brazil satellite event. “The question-answer sessions are livelier, and collaborations can form during coffee breaks or over dinner,” Berkovits says. And there’s just no denying the benefits of being able to ask questions in real time, adds Omololu Akin-Ojo, the director of the ICTP East African Institute for Fundamental Research at the University of Rwanda and the organizer of the Rwanda satellite event.

For Zehra Sayers, a biophysicist at Sabancı University, Turkey, satellite events have other bonuses, such as the ability to attend a conference that you might otherwise have to miss because it coincides with other responsibilities. “I have never attended a March Meeting [in person] before because it always happens at a time when I have heavy teaching duties,” Sayers says. But this year she was able to speak at and participate in the SESAME satellite event. Another big plus for Sayers is the potential of

using satellite conferences to strengthen regional connections among physicists working on the same topic. Berkovits agrees. Satellite sessions can “help build a community for future collaborations,” he says. “The [events] also increase the international visibility of the research done locally, since the [talks] are broadcast to participants all over the world.”

The possibility of giving a wider range of scientists a global stage on which to present their work was a motivator for all the satellite session organizers and for the APS. “So many of the world’s physicists cannot participate in meetings like the March Meeting,” Flatten says. “We hope these satellite sessions can help make a welcoming community for physicists of all of backgrounds, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, career level, and prosperity.”

Katherine Wright is the Deputy Editor of *Physics Magazine*.