

# Getting the Word Out: Boosting Science Reporting in Africa and the Middle East



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IDRC photo

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## ***An innovative new mentoring program aims to strengthen science reporting in developing countries***

Understanding how diseases are transmitted can help prevent infection. Agricultural technologies can improve crop resilience, increasing yields and incomes for farmers. The benefits of scientific research are many, but if people don't hear about it, they can't make use of it.

This communication gap is most conspicuous in developing countries, particularly in Africa. Research into biotechnology, HIV/AIDS, and climate change, for example, flourishes there, but journalists lack the specialized training they need to report it.

### **Peer support for developing-country science journalists**

In an innovative attempt to strengthen science journalism in Africa and the Middle East, a new international mentoring program was launched in September. The Peer-to-Peer (P2P) Mentoring Project, jointly funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre — through its Innovation Policy and Science program — and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, will draw on the expertise of 22 veteran science journalists from Africa, Europe, and North America to build the skills and confidence of 60 journalists in developing countries.

The project, announced by the World Federation of Science Journalists (WFSJ) earlier this year, will also twin emerging associations of science journalists with well-established ones. By providing a framework for sharing information and ideas, for dialogue and debate, the international peer network will improve the analytical and technical capacity of science journalists and, ultimately, the quality of science coverage.

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## **Peer-to-peer mentoring**

The participants will be organized into three groups: Anglophone Africa, Francophone Africa, and North Africa and the Middle East. Four practising journalists in print, broadcast, or Internet media will be matched with each mentor based on their language and media background.

“We’ve gone through a lot of understanding of what mentoring is and what it involves,” says Kathryn O’Hara, who facilitated the Munich workshop and also holds the CTV chair in science broadcast journalism at Carleton University in Canada. The primary obligation of the mentors, she explains, is “to be there with expertise that [the participants] wouldn’t have access to otherwise.”

Mentoring is a well-established method for training journalists, and the mentors themselves also stand to learn — about what science is reported in other countries, and how it is done.

Zouhour Himmich, a science journalist in Morocco will be mentoring in the North Africa and Middle East group. “I want to discover these journalists,” she says. “I want to know and to learn from them. I am not a prophet, I am a journalist like them.”

The mentoring relationships will begin to take shape when the participants meet for the first time in Nairobi in November. To give them an opportunity to cover an international scientific conference, this gathering will be tied to the joint meetings of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol and the twelfth session of the Conference of the Parties to the Climate Change Convention (COP 12).

## **The learning begins**

“It’s a tough project in the sense that we don’t know how everything will work yet,” says O’Hara.

Many questions need to be answered, from logistic details to broader matters. Is storytelling universal? How can international standards in science journalism stand up when national contexts are remarkably different? Just as science itself must be suited to the specific needs of different countries, so must the way in which scientific knowledge is communicated.

Nadia El-Awady, health and science editor for the IslamOnline website in Egypt and coordinator of the North Africa and Middle East group, comments, “We tend to talk more, give more examples and tell more stories when we talk.... We sometimes have a different journalism ‘culture’... because of how our social cultures affect the way we communicate.”

## **Strength in numbers**

The Peer-to-Peer Mentoring Project will not only benefit individual journalists, but will also help strengthen regional science journalism networks.

According to El-Awady, “The P2P mentoring program is important to the whole Arab region.... We have about 55 applicants so far, and most of them were not even aware that they had colleagues in other parts of the Arab world with similar interests in covering science! This is a wonderful networking opportunity for those journalists.”

Jean-Marc Fleury, executive director of the WFSJ, adds, “Science journalists working in many developing countries haven’t had much contact with each other. This project will raise the profile of science journalism. It will help give it recognition and raise the standards of the profession.”

## Going global

The mentoring project has been met with enthusiasm so far. More than 175 journalists in 37 countries in Africa and the Middle East have applied for a spot in the program.

Several media outlets have committed to providing Internet support or publishing articles generated by the project, and partnerships have been discussed with journalism schools, research institutions, and professional associations of medical researchers.

Wolfgang Goede, a mentor and science news editor for Germany’s leading popular science magazine P.M., accounts for the positive response. “This peer-to-peer mentoring program is something completely new and it is being appreciated very much... because it makes sense.”

The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency’s Department for Research Cooperation (SIDA-SAREC) formally confirmed funding of approximately CA\$500 000 to the peer-to-peer project in October 2006.

The next priority for the peer-to-peer project will be to expand the mentoring scheme to Latin America, Asia, and Eastern Europe. The WFSJ plans to announce the next region to join the project during the 5th World Conference of Science Journalists to be held in Melbourne, Australia, in April 2007.

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