



Health ↔ Environment: Global Links

Training, Capacity Building and “Institutionalization” in Ecohealth: A Success Story?

Institutionalization may be a hard-to-define buzzword, but if it means putting in place a long-term, sustainable structure for the ecohealth approach, then there is reason to celebrate. The National Public Health Institute of Mexico (INSP), for example, now reviews all its projects with an ecohealth lens to benefit from the added value of a systemic approach (<http://www.insp.mx/>). In Ecuador, the first group of students will soon graduate from the only (so far...) Masters Program in Ecohealth through the *Sustainably Managing Environmental Health Risk in Ecuador* project (http://www.cih.ubc.ca/EN/cih-based_projects/ubc_and_international_team/). In Sub-Saharan Africa, students train in ecohealth, and some university departments are integrating the approach into their curriculum.

In the four years since the first Ecohealth Forum in Montreal, progress in embedding the ecohealth approach in institutions has been measurable. The Montreal Ecohealth Forum gave rise to a unified call to form networks linking those working in environment and health, recalls Dr. Jean-Michel Labatut, Ecohealth Program Specialist at IDRC. The formation of the communities of practice in ecohealth (COPEHs) was one key response, as is the training and knowledge exchange that occurs within and beyond COPEHs.

According to Dr. Labatut, training is essential for integrating ecohealth into everyday research, along with a sup-



portive, collegial network — and both are linked to capacity building. Currently, IDRC’s Ecohealth Program provides various types of training worldwide, including ecohealth short courses for researchers, graduate students and others interested in the approach in general. Individual COPEHs hold training workshops, both to build capacity and to “grow” their partners. In addition, awards for field research related to graduate training are also available.

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Celebrating the life of a community leader— Dr. Henri Bosko Djeuda Tchapnga

It is with great sadness that the ecohealth community says farewell to a dear friend and colleague, Dr. Henri Bosko. Dr. Bosko died in January 2007, in a car accident in Cameroun.

Beyond a doubt, Dr. Bosko, professor in engineering at the École Polytechnique, University of Yaounde, Cameroon, was a leader in applying

the ecohealth approach to the issues facing West Africa. He was also deeply involved in empowering the communities participating in his research.

Dr. Bosko was one of the “maîtres d’oeuvre” in West Africa’s ecohealth community, recalls IDRC’s Jean-Michel Labatut. Young and dynamic, Dr. Bosko was instrumental in found-

ing the region’s now burgeoning community of practice (Communauté de pratique en écosanté en Afrique Centrale et Afrique de l’Ouest/COPEH-AOC).

All his activities aimed to build capacity, and to transfer and exchange knowledge in the ecohealth and environmental evaluation fields in West

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Training efforts have paid off. As Dr. Charron, Program Leader of IDRC’s Ecohealth Program notes, research capacity and quality in ecohealth has grown dramatically around the world. Institutional capacity, however, has not kept pace. More sophisticated research infrastructure in host institutions is needed, as well as the capacity to administer larger research funds.

“When ecohealth researchers stay in their home countries, there is a strong temptation to go to private or international research institutions that have stronger infrastructures and better working condition. Others prefer to leave, therefore contributing to the brain-drain issue and further weakening local institutions’ capabilities,” explains Charron.

Other, more specific needs, says Charron, are often identified in the fields of epidemiology, entomology, social sciences, medical geography, environmental toxicology and gender studies, with a transdisciplinary perspective. Researchers require up-to-date information on new tools and methods to carry out holistic yet integrated research studies and on the ways to design and maintain databases that allow for systemic analysis of large amounts of complex data.

Existing COPEHs have addressed these needs to some extent by communicating research results, exchanging experiences and accessing other resources, “achieving a huge impact by working together.” While communication within COPEHs is flourishing,

there is little cross-COPEH and cross regional networking yet.

Each COPEH has evolved to address unique regional needs, but there are many opportunities to learn from each other. As Charron points out, “much of the work is highly transferable,” so that COPEHs do not need to start from scratch. Training materials, for instance, could be shared relatively easily.

Charron also notes the need to share information and communicate results beyond COPEHs. Communication between themes, for example, could facilitate exchanges between clusters of projects worldwide dealing with similar issues, such as malaria and rice cultivation. “Ecohealth is about fostering connections.”

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Dr. Henri Bosko Djeuda Tchapnga

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Africa. His research into both these areas allowed him to contribute to the application of environmental and social governance tools as well as to community development.

Dr. Bosko recruited a variety of expertise from different university departments and NGOs for his research on the link between wastewater management and the health of young children and infants in one Yaounde neighbourhood.

The result of his collaborative, transdisciplinary teamwork was increased capacity for team members and their respective institutions, and a cadre of graduate students well versed in the “art” of making the links between environmental issues and health.

These advancements were critical in integrating the ecohealth approach in the engineering department of l’École Polytechnique, which was but the first step in reaching other departments.

Dr. Bosko also recognized the importance of reaching decision-makers to firmly embed the ecohealth approach in society. As a result, his work aimed to sensitize decision-makers, particularly those in the NEPAD’s environment sector. Dr. Bosko also left a mark on the Yaounde community he worked with, which was initially fragmented and divided. His research served as a tool to construct the social glue that was missing.

His involvement in capacity building and environmental issues went beyond

the COPES-OAC and his role as principal instructor in Benin’s summer institutes in ecohealth. He was also an active member of the Secretariat International francophone pour l’évaluation environnementale (SIFÉE) and was involved in SIFÉE’s 11th International Colloquia and Summer Institute in 2006.

Dr. Bosko approached his work, whether research or teaching, with brio. His students and colleagues remember him as an inspiring, charismatic teacher with an appetite for discussion, and an advisor who supported his students, from both a human and professional perspective.

Dr. Bosko has left an indelible mark on the scientific and NGO community. His sudden death affected many, and his kindness and smile will remain with us.



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COPEES-AOC: Young researchers in the spotlight

The Community of Practice in Ecohealth in Western and Central Africa (COPEES-AOC) is on a mission. Ever since the group was recognized at a meeting of the Ecohealth Regional Funds in Dakar in 2006, its activities have focused on training young researchers and students in the ecohealth approach in order to build capacity for research in the region.

In February 2006, a regional workshop held at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Abomey-Calavi in Benin brought together teams of young researchers from diverse disciplines including health, social science, geography and environment. Seven teams of three researchers with different perspectives were selected on the basis of pre-proposals and spent the week strengthening the ecohealth perspective of their proposal. At the end of the workshop, based on the quality of their revised proposals, the teams from Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso won grants to continue their research for a period of one year

Six months later, the COPEES-AOC organized a course in ecohealth in Benin for university graduates in West and Central Africa who had won IDRC Training Awards. Doctoral and master's students from as far as Burkina Faso, Sénégal, Nigeria and Cameroun spent one week immersed in all aspects of ecohealth.

The awards also allowed students to conduct fieldwork, communicate their results and travel to international conferences to present and share their research. According to Dr. Fayomi, coordinator of COPEES-AOC, these opportunities will provide young African researchers with invaluable experience and will contribute to

build capacity in the region.

COPEES-AOC stays in touch with its trainees. Long after a workshop, participants connect with each other and with COPEES-AOC members for collegial support. When he has the opportunity, Dr. Fayomi also visits researchers who have participated in trainings in order to provide guidance. Further, during the University of Abomey-Calavi regional ecohealth workshop, one person from each of the winning proposals was appointed to follow the projects as they proceeded and report back to COPEES-AOC.

With a successful 2006 training year, COPEES-AOC is planning for another workshop for November 2007, with the theme of solid waste management in the context of ecohealth. The call for applications is aimed at graduate students in the West and Central Africa region who will work intensively on this major issue plaguing the region.

Dr. Fayomi says that one key goal of the COPEES-AOC is to institutionalize the

ecohealth approach in universities, so that the approach is assimilated in existing programs. This is already happening at the University of Abomey-Calavi of Benin where an ecohealth course is part of the master's degree in water quality and sanitation. In Burkina Faso, the ecohealth concepts are introduced through the Engineering Department.

As the COPEES-AOC is working hard to train the region's young researchers, Dr. Fayomi notes that better teaching infrastructure is required, including the human resources to actually carry out this training and the training material. The COPEES-AOC is looking at distance education as one way to address these issues.

Researchers in ecohealth in the West Africa region need to mobilize themselves to get the funds in place to provide the best possible training for the next generation of researchers. Dr. Fayomi says that in this way, experience in ecohealth will be accrued to address the issues facing the region.

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Editorial: Shaping the newsletter

The Ecohealth *Health —Environment Global Links Newsletter*, now in its fourth edition, has grown in diversity and readership. Currently produced in five languages, it reaches researchers, graduate students and practitioners worldwide. What started as an eight-page newsletter now highlights the work of existing communities of practice in ecohealth (COPEHs) in Latin America and the Caribbean, in the Middle East and North Africa and in West Africa, bringing together people with a common interest.

Can the newsletter go further? Can it become an even more effective tool for communication between and within the different regions and members and non-members of communities of practice? We all have valuable information — training materials and courses,

case studies, research methodology and capacity building activities — to share with others. Pressing needs in one COPEH or region may have already been addressed by others. Sharing resources and expertise can only strengthen the whole community.

Does the newsletter provide a platform for such an information exchange? Perhaps for the newsletter to be a truly effective communication tool, it should be “owned” by the COPEHs, each taking a turn in the editorial role? This open-ended possibility should be explored, as it relates closely to this issue's theme — institutionalization, capacity building and training activities. We need your feedback on the newsletter: tell us what you want it to be. Send your comments to: newsletter@theconferencepublishers.com



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COPEH-TLAC: Building methodological capacity for a strong network

Capacity building, specifically in the areas of methodology and technology, is the focus of many of COPEH-TLAC's activities. As COPEH-TLAC members Dr. Donna Mergler and graduate student, Mélanie Lemire explain, the reinforcement of methods is a key objective of COPEH-TLAC: good methodology and current technology are essential to carry out ecohealth research and interventions. Achieving this has kept COPEH-TLAC busy.

In April 2007, Dr. Fernando Barbosa Jr. of COPEH-TLAC's Brazilian node led a professional development workshop in Ribeirao Preto, Brazil, that focused on sampling, sample analyses, and new technologies in the ecohealth context. Participants came from 10 countries of the Americas and represented both public employees and researchers from the "Segundo anillo/second circle" from all five COPEH nodes. The idea, say Mergler and Lemire, "was to create a network to exchange knowledge, and to set up quality control between laboratories."

The workshop "got the chemists out of their laboratories," and brought many different disciplines to the table. The considerable contribution of COPEH's Brazilian colleagues attested to the degree to which the ecohealth approach has been integrated in that country's institutions. Lemire describes the workshop as an incredible success in learning and sharing experiences; the synergy among participants was palpable.

The meeting also provided the basis for an analytical network within the COPEH where different methodologies can be exchanged, inexpensive

ones developed and groups with limited infrastructure can cooperate with those who have more. Momentum has been built and follow-up is intended in the form of an interactive internet blog, "so that participants can remain in contact, collaborate and exchange." This, according to Mergler, was the first of many capacity building workshops in the region where the ecohealth approach is being integrated but methods are not keeping pace.

COPEH-TLAC also hosted an ecohealth roundtable at the 2nd International Congress on Occupational Health in Cuba in March 2007. Dr. Berna van Wendel de Joode, COPEH-TLAC member from Costa Rica, explains that the workshop was an outreach activity, open to all congress-goers, that promoted the ecohealth approach, information exchange and collaboration. "For many it was an eye opener." Another training workshop was held in Costa Rica in March 2007 on neurobehavioral methods to study the effects of chemical exposures on children; COPEH members from Nicaragua, Mexico and Costa Rica participated.

The Cono Sur (Chile) node focuses on gender issues, and trains other nodes in this important topic. Another fruitful exchange is the effort to update COPEH-TLAC's website, www.insp.mx/copeh-tlac/esp/inf/; a collaborative project between the Mexican and Canadian nodes. Such exchanges between the different nodes of COPEH-TLAC are common and

are effective ways to build capacity.

With all this momentum, the integration of the ecohealth approach in several institutions in the LAC region is well under way. The new director general of Mexico's National Public Health Institute, a COPEH-TLAC member, is approaching his mandate with an ecohealth lens. In Costa Rica, Brazil and Bolivia, several university-based COPEH-TLAC members are



working to integrate ecohealth courses into their undergraduate programs.

Mergler notes that long-term sustainability of the COPEHs is an important issue that needs to be addressed. Van Wendel de Joode says another issue is the lack of documentation of existing ecohealth projects and discussions from the different nodes. There is no "systematic approach to training and teaching materials yet," and more sharing of existing materials and/or development of new ones should take place. Informational brochures about COPEHs for potential members would also be useful. But as van Wendel de Joode says, COPEH-TLAC has very positive energy. "We are always trying to find solutions."



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Focus on capacity building in COPEH-MENA

One of the objectives of the Community of Practice in Ecohealth in the Middle East and Northern Africa (COPEH-MENA) is to promote a comprehensive and transdisciplinary understanding of the link between environment and health among Arab researchers in the MENA region. COPEH-MENA members have also agreed that some capacity building is necessary to strengthen the network.

making in the health sector. Ecohealth case studies will be central in the course to illustrate concepts raised. According to COPEH-MENA member Dr. Iman Nuwayhid, the impetus for such workshops reflects the current needs and gaps of the ecohealth community; he hopes the outcome will considerably increase individual and group capacity in the COPEH.

Other specific needs and gaps identified by COPEH-MENA members are a lack of documentation and writing experience. Thus planning is under way for another ecohealth workshop aimed at young professionals and researchers in the region in September 2007.

The focus could be on writing scientific articles or producing materials for lay audiences. Once results are available from ecohealth research, how can that information best be disseminated back to the community?

Many other ideas for capacity building activities have come out of the COPEH's regular meetings. Dr. Nuwayhid says that the idea of offering young researchers internships has also been discussed, as has the proposal to visit projects outside the region to share information and experience.

COPEH-MENA members need to "find venues for better collaboration," emphasizes Nuwayhid. The group is already identifying topics of common interest, such as climate change, and

determining the associated training needs.

As the newest COPEH, COPEH-MENA is still in the first stage of capacity building, which is to "spread the message and train researchers in ecohealth." The group is already planning for the second stage of strengthening the network and reinforcing the ecohealth approach. "We must be strong within first, and then we will bring in others," states Dr. Nuwayhid.

Is the ecohealth approached being integrated into institutions in the MENA region? The American University of Beirut (AUB) opted for an infusive strategy rather than programs or courses in ecohealth. The Interfaculty Program of Environmental Sciences integrates both the livelihood and ecohealth concepts into all courses. Students are trained in and exposed to ecohealth in a faculty where different disciplines work together by nature. Such training will go a long way in raising awareness of the links between health and environment, and in building research capacity.



Bringing environmental or public health findings to decision-makers, and effectively arguing the health and environment message will be the focus of a workshop in the near future. COPEH-MENA has invited its members to the weeklong workshop on effective communication to decision-makers. The workshop is part of the annual Summer Institute organized by the American University of Beirut's Faculty of Health Sciences.

The workshop will introduce basic concepts in using evidence and data to plan and evaluate public health programs and interventions. Participants will discuss and experiment with strategies and skills for effective communication for influencing decision

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Newsbrief

Your input, please!

Since the first “Health-Environment: Global Links” newsletter was produced in 2005, its website has had thousands of visitors; between June 2006 and May 2007, nearly 3300 unique visits. Does this mean it is being read in depth? Is the newsletter filling an important communication need? Could the newsletter be complemented by an interactive website? Should it be theme-based? These questions, and others, need answers. Before a variety of possibilities are explored, we’d like to hear from you, our readers. Is the newsletter meeting your needs?

E-mail your comments to newsletter@TheConferencepublishers.com or snail-mail them to The Conference Publishers, 110-858 Bank St. Ottawa, ON, K1S 3W3, Canada.

Avian flu in a different light

6 Avian flu, its potential threat and the media attention it has attracted are put into context by Ontario veterinarian and epidemiologist Dr. Waltner-Toews’ new book, *The Chickens Fight Back*. Transmission of viruses from animals to humans is nothing new, Waltner-Toews says, citing the bubonic plague, Ebola, SARS, malaria and salmonella. Neither is the arrival of avian flu a surprise, given the developed world’s insatiable appetite for low-cost, low-fat sources of protein—which has led countries like China to produce even more chickens. Ever-increasing contact between animals and humans, and the resulting transfer of diseases, are inevitable. *The Chickens*

Fight Back is an ecohealth analysis in every sense, as it points to the connection between human health and such inequities as poverty, overcrowded cities and a lack of clean water.

19th IUHPE World Conference on Health Promotion and Health Education

The 19th IUHPE World Conference on Health Promotion and Health Education, *Health Promotion Comes of Age: Research, Policy & Practice for the 21st Century*, was held in Vancouver, Canada June 10–15, 2007. The conference examined the five strategic action areas, guiding principles and values of health promotion, based on the 1986 Ottawa Charter. The conference organizer, the International Union for Health Promotion and Education (IUHPE) aimed to enhance partnerships and inter-sectoral collaborations for health promotion. Specific conference themes included reducing health inequities, assets for health and development, enabling system transformations and assessing the effectiveness of health promotion. The conference also provided an opportunity to initiate discussions about the creation of a Canadian COPEH, which would gather Canadian universities active in ecohealth research. COPEH activities could include establishing an annual training course in ecohealth; exchanging practical ecohealth research experiences; and other joint activities.

Information: www.iuhpeconference.org/en/conference/about.htm

12th International Colloquium of SIFÉE

The Secrétariat international francophone pour l’évaluation environnementale (SIFÉE) held its 12th International Colloquium in Geneva, Switzerland June 18–22, 2007. The colloquium was based on the theme, *Environmental evaluation and transport: concepts, tools and methodology*. The preceding summer institute (the 11th edition) focused on environmental evaluation tools and methods applied in the transport sector. The scientific committee, including the Ecohealth Program Initiative, planned an intense program. Participants used the colloquium and institute as a platform to exchange tools and to critically analyze the effects of transport on the biophysical and human environments; economic and resource impacts were also examined.

Information: www.sifee.org/Suisse/suisse2007.htm

New COPEHs may be emerging

IDRC’s Ecohealth Program is holding capacity building and training activities in East and Southern Africa in November 2007. In addition, Ecohealth Graduate Training Awards are also launched for East and Southern Africa: five awards will be allocated on a competitive basis and a week of training will be provided to the recipient of the awards, at the

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Time, effort and resources are required for these types of networks to function, and to achieve what researchers want them to achieve — capacity building leading to institutionalization of the ecohealth approach. But as

Charron states, the challenge is to ensure that the purpose of the networks remains valuable and worthwhile for the researchers.

All ideas to ponder, for now and at the 2008 Ecohealth Forum. The next Ecohealth Forum, organized jointly by the Ecohealth Program in IDRC and

by the International Association for Ecology and Health (IAEH) will be held at the end of 2008.

Stay tuned for more information and a call for papers in the coming months at www.idrc.ca/ecohealth.

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Centre for Environment, Agriculture and Development (CEAD) of the University of Kwazulu Natal (South Africa). Another capacity building activity will take place in Kenya for Ecohealth partners in East and Southern Africa. The training will

address conceptual and methodological principles of ecohealth, monitoring and evaluation, knowledge translation, communication of research results, and database management and analysis. These activities are intended to be the first stage in bringing people in the region together, and could signal the beginning of a community of practice.

For information on how to apply for the Graduate Training Awards check: www.idrc.ca/en/ev-85672-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.

Past & Future Events

Calls for applications for the Ecohealth training awards

1) Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC)

The call for application for the Ecohealth training awards in Latin America closed on June 15, 2007. The associated Ecohealth Training Course was held in Mexico City, Mexico from August 6–10, 2007. This year’s course theme is “Enfoques ecosistémicos en Salud Humana. Enfermedades transmitidas por vectores (Dengue y tripanosomiasis americana) y Riesgos a la salud por exposición a tóxicos ambientales.”

Information: www.idrc.ca/en/ev-10891-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html

2) Sub-Saharan Africa

The Ecohealth Program at IDRC launched a new call for applications for an ecohealth training awards for graduates in East and Southern Africa. These awards support graduate-level research on the relationships between the environment, human health, and development. The theme of the competition is the “application of the Ecohealth approach to urbanization.” The deadline for applications is September 21, 2007. Another call for graduates in West and Central Africa is under preparation and will most probably focus on the theme of “Ecohealth approaches to solid waste”.

Updates available at: www.idrc.ca/en/ev-85672-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html.

3) Canada

Applications for the 2007 Ecohealth Graduate Awards in Canada are now being accepted. The call is restricted to graduate students registered at Canadian universities. The deadline for application is September 15, 2007. The theme of the competition is: “Ecohealth approaches to preventing and controlling communicable diseases.”

Updates available at: www.idrc.ca/en/ev-85672-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html



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Coming events

Summer, 2007

Workshops on Effective Communication, Beirut, Lebanon

COPEH-MENA is partnering with The American University of Beirut (AUB) to conduct two workshops, one on evidence-based public health and another on communicating public health information and research results effectively to policy makers. The aim is to provide researchers with tools to become more effective in influencing decision-making in the health and environment sector.

Further information can be obtained from: Passinte Isaak at pisaak@nefdev.org.

September 5–9, 2007

19th Conference of the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE), Mexico City, Mexico

Hosted by Mexico's National Institute of Public Health (INSP), a long-standing Ecohealth partner, the conference will give IDRC sponsored panelists the opportunity to discuss the ecohealth approach and its achievements in the context of environmental epidemiology. Ecohealth will organize symposia on Communicable Disease and Agriculture and Health, on Climate Change and Health, and on Communicable Disease along with supporting the COPEH-TLAC in its symposium on environmental pollution. IDRC will also offer a pre-conference course on climate change and health while the Mexican node of COPEH-TLAC will give a course on the ecohealth approach. COPEH-TLAC members will also present and participate in panels throughout the

conference. ISEE will be a venue to strengthen the existing COPEH-TLAC network and to invite new partners to integrate an ecohealth approach into their research and practice. Information: www.isee2007mx.org. Pre-conference course information at: www.isee2007mx.org/precongreso_i.php

September 10, 2007

COPEH-TLAC 1st Regional Conference, Mexico City, Mexico

Immediately following the ISEE conference in Mexico City (see details above), all five COPEH-TLAC regional nodes will meet to exchange experiences, grow the community and plan for the future.

Conference information at: www.insp.mx/copeh-tlac/

October 29–November 2, 2007

Global Forum for Health Research, Forum 11, Beijing, China

This annual Global Forum will explore *Equitable Access: Research challenges for health in developing countries*. Participants will examine how changes — in health care systems and access, in social and gender inequities, and in living/working conditions — could bring about better population health, particularly in the poor and marginalized. Policy-makers, researchers and the NGO community will come together to debate critical gaps in research, and to mobilize campaigns that address the health needs of the poor and marginalized.

Information: www.globalforumhealth.org/Site/004__Annual%20meeting/002__Forum%2011/001__Home.php

November 4–7, 2007

14th annual Canadian Conference on International Health, Ottawa, Canada

Recognition of the impact of our changing world on human health is increasing. The Canadian Society for International Health, in partnership with the Canadian Coalition for Global Health Research, is focusing on *Global Change and Health: Who Are the Vulnerable?* The conference will address how human-caused changes, such as climate change and loss of ecological biodiversity, can affect global health. As well, participants will explore how globalization and rising poverty are increasing the vulnerability of certain populations to disease.

Information: www.csih.org/en/ccih/index.asp

December 2007

CoPEH-MENA 1st Regional Workshop

The Community of Practice for Ecohealth in the Middle East and North Africa (COPEH-MENA) plans to conduct a knowledge sharing regional workshop at the end of 2007. With a focus on the impact of implementing the ecohealth approach in the MENA region, researchers, development practitioners and policy makers will discuss how they can promote the use of this approach, exchange experiences and set the stage for future collaborations. The aim is to create a critical mass of stakeholders with an interest in ecosystem approaches to improving human health in the MENA region.

Information: www.copeh-mena.org