
A development
science writing workshop
in East Africa

A NEW VOICE FOR SCIENCE

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Nineteen journalists from nine eastern and southern African countries left their regular reporting beats on newspapers and radio stations for 10 days in February to wrestle with the practical problems of communicating science to a mass audience. They took part in the second of a series of international workshops to learn new techniques or adapt old ones to improve media coverage of science and technology for development in the region.

Organized by the School of Journalism at the University of Nairobi, Kenya, and sponsored by IDRC, the workshop was also attended by 20-30 graduate students from the School of Journalism.

The Nairobi workshop followed a similar event organized by the Centre d'étude des sciences et techniques de l'information (CESTI) at the University of Dakar, Senegal, last April (see *Reports* 10(3)). The Dakar workshop resulted in the formation of an association of science journalists determined to exchange ideas and articles and to create an awareness among other journalists in the region of the need to promote science communication in the popular media.

As in Dakar, morning lectures or presentations on development science projects or issues by scientists in the Nairobi workshop were followed by press conference-style questioning by the journalists. Four field visits to project sites also took place. The resulting articles were edited and critiqued by professional science writers and instructors acting as resource persons and returned to the students the next day. This meant the students could incorporate suggestions into the subsequent interview sessions and articles.

A 10-day workshop does not turn a journalist into a science writer. But it does begin the process of creating one. One of the resource persons, science editor for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper (Toronto, Canada), Terry Christian, commented after the Nairobi workshop: "While these journalists cannot be called seasoned science writers, the workshop gave them an introduction into the kinds of science stories that are pertinent to the people of Africa, how these stories can be developed and written, what kinds of questions to ask scientists, and how to build a working relationship with them."

"It also taught them how to be skeptical of so-called miracle breakthroughs that supposedly will solve all of the problems facing Africans. They now know that advancement is sometimes slow, painfully slow, but that a greater awareness on the part of the people can accelerate change, especially by overcoming social factors which may slow or halt development."

The participants also took away with them the knowledge — acquired with a great deal of effort — of how to

approach the task involved in the popularization of science through the media in their own countries.

The learning experience was also not confined to the workshop program. Most evenings the journalists gathered to exchange views and information on development science writing and on their countries' media in general. As most of them had not travelled extensively outside their own nations, these informal sessions were very valuable for their professional development.

Conscious that this kind of communication must not end with the workshop, the journalists, following the example of their francophone counterparts in West Africa, formed the Eastern and Southern Africa Science Writers Association (ESASWA). Its main objectives are to maintain stronger contacts between the member countries, to exchange ideas and articles on development science, and to create awareness among other journalists in the region of the need to improve science writing.

A three-member interim administration committee was chosen to run the association and will submit a progress report every three months. Elected as President was Epajjar Ojulu of the *Uganda Times*; as Secretary, Francis Harawa of the *Malawi News*; and as Treasurer, Margaret Khonje of the *Daily News*, Tanzania.

The association will first set up a system to facilitate the exchange of articles, and produce a quarterly newsletter. IDRC will provide funds to cover the newsletter's costs.

A third IDRC-sponsored development science writing workshop will take place later in 1982 in the Philippines for Southeast Asian journalists. The workshop will be held at Silliman University, Dumaguete City, 22 November-1 December, and will be organized by the University and the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia, which publishes the *Depthnews* science news features service.

The need for these workshops was summed up by Terry Christian: "Scientific development for the Third World is only as effective as its dissemination to the people in need of it. Therefore, the need for journalists ready, willing, and able to write on development science is immense." □

The articles that accompany this report have not been heavily edited or rewritten. They appear basically as they were written by the participants — young journalists just starting out on the road to becoming interpreters for their readers and listeners and viewers of how science and technology is being used in the development of their countries and regions.

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