

WRENmedia report to DFID: Communicating research: contributing to sustainable development

Science reporting capacity-building workshop

Lusaka, Zambia, October 2010

Summary

As part of WRENmedia's ongoing capacity building for African science reporters, eight southern African journalists (print and radio) undertook a six-day training workshop in Lusaka, Zambia. The workshop theme was Crop Protection, and included presentations by two scientists at the training venue, and further input from a range of speakers – including farmers, farm managers and other specialists in crop protection, at three venues 'in the field'. A local co-trainer (a participant on a previous better science reporting workshop) was employed to make contacts and arrangements prior to the course, and to provide logistical and mentoring support during the workshop.

Lessons learned included: gathering information 'in the field' is preferred by journalists, but locations need to be closer to training venue, in order to reduce travelling time; speakers briefing the group need more detailed information in order to give presentations at an appropriate level and content; one computer per trainee is essential.

Context

The purpose of WRENmedia DFID-supported communication research programme is to change development partners' practices by providing information for quality decision-making through better communication of research and policy of sustainable development issues through multi-media channels. A key component of this programme is to provide:

- Improved capacity of development stakeholders (researchers, policymakers) and journalists to communicate research and development issues

As part of WRENmedia's ongoing innovation in building the capacity of African journalists to report science, and of researchers to deal positively and productively with the media, we undertook a six-day training workshop, using the following approach:

Selection of participants

A call for participant applications was made to print and radio journalists from southern Africa with an interest in reporting on scientific topics, through communication and media contacts in the region. From around 50 applicants, eight trainees were selected, four working in radio and four from print media houses, including four Zambians, two Malawians and two Zimbabweans, one of whom works in South Africa. The course was planned and run in collaboration with Sanday Kabange, a Lusaka-based radio reporter who had attended a previous Better Science Reporting workshop and is part of the correspondent network for WRENmedia's Agfax service.



Malawian participant Upile Ndilowe interviews Lenni Ngulube, a Zambian farmer who uses conservation agriculture to boost soil fertility and grow stronger, healthier crops (WRENmedia)

Duration

The course was shorter than previously (6 days, compared to 10), chiefly because of an awareness that the greater length of the previous course, while being beneficial for the training process, could not be afforded, in terms of WRENmedia staff time, under the funding allocation for training within the contract. An additional factor was also the relative costliness of accommodation and training venue in Zambia, compared to previous training locations.

Theme

The workshop theme was crop protection. Topics included: common pest and disease problems; seed breeding for resistance to pests and diseases; building soil fertility for healthier crops; integrated pest management; scouting for pests and diseases; safe use and handling of pesticides.

Location

The workshop was held in two guesthouses, one in Lusaka and one in Chisamba, a rural area about 30 miles from the city. Both had conference room facilities and were able to offer a comfortable standard of accommodation. Both venues were quiet with stable power supplies and offered pleasant and cool conditions – an important factor, as the workshop took place during a hot time of year. The cost of the facilities was relatively high, compared to previous training workshops, but were the best options that could be identified from around ten venues contacted.

Scientist/research input

On the first two days of the course, input came from two scientists – an entomologist and a plant breeder, who gave briefings, followed by Q and A sessions with the group and individual interviews. The trainees were also briefed by Gillies Kasongo of PANOS Southern Africa, on his experience of communicating science and PANOS's work to improve science reporting in the region. Three days were then spent visiting three different 'field' locations, where the group were able to interact with a number of people involved in crop protection.



Lister Nyemba, assistant production manager at York Farm near Lusaka explains some of the farm's crop protection practices to Darlington Kahilu of Zambia's National Agricultural Information Service.
(WRENmedia)

York Farm, on the outskirts of Lusaka, grows horticultural crops for local and export markets, and employs a wide range of techniques to improve soil health and control pests and diseases, drawing heavily on integrated pest management and crop protection science. The group were given an overview of methods used on the farm and, divided into pairs, were then shown different strategies being employed, which provided an opportunity to record interviews with farm staff in different settings.

Further afield, about 30 miles from Lusaka, the group learned how small-scale farmers are boosting their soil and crop health and harvests through conservation agriculture, through input from Zambia's Conservation Farming Unit. The day included visits to field demonstration plots and training

venues, plus meetings with two groups of farmers. Weed control through use of herbicides was also highlighted.

The third visit was arranged through CropLife Zambia, part of an international federation to represent the plant science industry. Some 2.5 hours drive from Lusaka, the group met farmers who had been trained as Spray Service Providers (SSPs), and were therefore able to offer pest and weed management services in their area. The group also spoke to organizers of the project and to clients of the SSPs, to investigate safe and effective use of agro-chemicals.

On each field visit, the trainees were divided into at least three groups, in order to maximize their contact with the resource people. They thus had a good amount of time to hear about the issues and to conduct interviews and gather information as well as take photographs.

Reporting skills

On location and during production time on return from field visits the journalists were guided in print and radio production. Three of the radio journalists wanted to learn and master digital editing and mixing. Discussions on overcoming technical problems, editorial decisions and creative reporting were held around the work in progress on the assignments each journalist undertook.

Beyond the workshop

On their return home participants reported on crop protection on air and in print in four countries. A resource pack on crop protection made from the features, interviews, and fact sheets prepared by the group (see www.agfax.net) was distributed to 80 radio stations across Africa.

Lessons learned

- Visiting the various ‘science safari’ venues was certainly valued by the group, not least for the opportunity to meet farmers and field-based development workers. In previous courses participants had reported that having only one or two opportunities to meet farmers was not adequate. However, several trainees commented that the working day was too long. Especially on the field visit days, when the group had an early start, was out interviewing and absorbing information for much of the day, they felt in need of more rest in the evenings, instead of being expected to work on their assignments. Arranging slightly shorter field visits, and identifying locations for visits within easier reach of the training venue could be helpful in achieving a better balance between gathering information and processing it.
- The pressure on time, including the need for early starts, and spending a large part of the working day in the field on three days, meant the training days did not provide quite the same structure – including activities such as daily quizzes – which had worked well in previous courses. While accepting the need for flexibility in a workshop of this kind, the trainers also realize the value of some regular daily activities in order to maintain the structured focus of the workshop.
- Prior to the course, considerable time was spent identifying suitable guest speakers, who were briefed on the purposes of the training, the topic for their presentation, and logistical arrangements. Pitching presentations at an appropriate level for the journalists remained an issue for some. Although all the journalists had a strong interest in reporting on agricultural science, their knowledge of the subject was less than several speakers assumed, which resulted in some presentations being pitched at too high a level. The importance of improving scientists’ understanding of how to pitch information to journalists without scientific training – as done in previous, conference-based ‘Making the most of the media’ sessions – was highlighted.
- Unlike previous courses, four of the eight trainees did not have their own laptop. WRENmedia made available three laptops, but two print journalists needed to share one machine, which was unfortunate.
- Using a local co-trainer was certainly very valuable, particularly in terms of logistics and mentoring those who had little experience of digital editing and recording



Friday Phiri from Yatsani radio, Zambia, records sound effects for a feature on the use of herbicides in conservation agriculture (WRENmedia)

voiceovers. However, the co-trainer needed a clearer demarcation of role in order to contribute more fully to the course.

- The journalists who attended the course had varying degrees of ability and motivation. Overall the radio journalists were more committed to making the most of the opportunities to acquire knowledge and master new skills as well as complete the assignments. They put in an extra 2-3 hours work per day compared to the print participants. Attracting and selecting better print journalists is a priority for future courses.

Going forward

The training, while much valued by the trainees, highlighted several challenges in organizing a workshop of this kind in a new location and at a distance. These included the difficulty of



Davidson Mudzingwa, who reports for Radio Voice of the People in South Africa, interviews farmer Edison Nang'ongwe about his use of herbicides (WRENmedia)

ensuring appropriately pitched presentations from subject specialists, and of arranging for a variety of field based reporting activities that could highlight different elements of the workshop theme, but not require too much travelling. Attempts were made to collaborate with a partner organization (PANOS Southern Africa) in planning this workshop. Ultimately, however, this collaboration was limited, with the partner organization requesting unreasonably high fees for their involvement, beyond the budget available.

Future course planning might be helped by working with a locally-based organization that could arrange a programme to maximise field-based reporting without huge time costs, and also be able to liaise more closely with subject specialists prior to the workshop. An in-country partner could also help with identifying a lower cost venue for the training; previous course venues have been provided by development or educational organizations. Such an option could not be identified in Zambia, hence the need to use hotels with conference facilities, at a considerably higher cost.

Given the need to achieve value for money in training activities, WRENmedia plans to review the training model in 2011.

Journalist feedback

Overall, the feedback from the week's training was very positive. Both numerical and anecdotal feedback was gathered at the end of the course by WRENmedia. The following scores were given for various aspects of the workshop, averaging the responses from the eight participants. All scores are out of a maximum of five. The relatively low score for Length of course reflected the wish of many participants that the course be longer, and have more 'downtime'.

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| Organisation prior to the course | 4.86 |
| Organisation during the course | 3.88 |
| Accommodation and meals | 4.13 |
| Length of course | 3.5 |
| Time spent in rural area | 4.5 |
| Training venue chosen | 4.38 |
| Variety of activities each day | 4.25 |

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|------------------------------------|------|
| Interaction with visiting speakers | 4.25 |
| Usefulness and interest of course | 5 |

“I did not really know some of the issues that go on in terms of agricultural reporting, terminologies and just the basic science of agricultural reporting. I think I did not know some of the basics which now I know. We had an opportunity of visiting some small-scale farmers practising conservation farming and I saw how this kind of farming method is helping the small-scale farmer. I want to start doing write ups on agriculture based on what I have learnt.” Alvin Chiinga, Zambia

“I think first of all I have learnt a lot of things especially when it comes to knowing the jargons in science reporting. Before this workshop I was blank when it comes to knowing some technical words but now I have a clue on some of them. When I will be back home in Malawi I am intending to start a column whereby I will be expressing things concerning about science and agriculture, how they relate, for the benefit of the farmers in Malawi.” Arkangel Tembo, Malawi

“I feel that it has improved our skills as much as it was a very comprehensive training and it really required a lot from us. I has really helpful and me in particular in terms of improving my skills in writing and also understanding the different aspects of how to report for better science. I learnt about integrated pest management, conservation agriculture, the use of botanical pesticides as well as chemical pesticides. And I have learnt that each time I am writing my articles I have to include my readers and find out what my readers would be looking for.” Upile Ndilowe, Malawi

Well one thing really that has fascinated me during this course is transferring yourself from the desk of being a reporter to being the end user of the information. So you have to start imagining you are helping out a farmer there, one who is listening to your programme. Also the issue of how to come up with a good kind of story; what is it that we want the listener to know from your interview? How can it affect or change your listener’s lifestyle? So these are some of the big pieces that I would really thank the course organisers for and I will hope to use them back to my office.” Darlington Kahilu, Zambia

“Checking at the end of the workshop and what I came knowing at the beginning of the workshop is a vast difference in the knowledge and it is has just improved me. I think I am very much changed in terms of reporting on issues of agriculture and science. As you know most of these issues are technical and you need to be so precise. You cannot just speculate or use a certain word at a wrong space.” Davison Mudzingwa, South Africa

“A lot of details I have got from this training. Actually on science reporting before I was avoiding to write on articles on complicated issues like integrated pest management because I did not have enough knowledge on that. But now I am able to write well informed articles and also to inform my farmers back in Zimbabwe on different choices that are available for them.” Elita Chikwati, Zimbabwe

“I have learnt precise writing skills in terms of writing scripts. A descriptive kind of writing where you can take the listeners with you, where you are. I intend to improve on the way I report on the agricultural programme that I do. I feel there is a lot that I should put in which I wasn’t. So now with this knowledge I think I will improve that programme. I will be making a good package which will be making sense to so many people.” Friday Phiri, Zambia

“The most helpful things for me were interviewing skills, being descriptive in reporting and learning digital editing skills. I now intend to do more reports of between three and five minutes, and have a different approach to programme production, taking into account the skills I have learned, like being descriptive and having a catchy intro.” Catherine Chisompola, Zambia

Researcher feedback

"I felt so good to share information in my area of expertise. There is a saying that s/he who waters the garden also waters herself/himself. As I was sharing with the journalists I was also being educated. I was also motivated to research more in those areas where I felt my answers to the journalists were deficient. Both the journalists and the scientist should be pro-active, hence they should not only wait for such occasions. We can still interact at different levels. In most cases, I see more of political, hunger and conflicts news coverage than agricultural news. How do we teach the farmers to be self sufficient in food supply in a sustainable manner?" Philemon Sohati, University of Zambia

"It was an honour to host the journalists and to be able to explain, though not able to demonstrate, our work with smallholder farmers. It gave me a good perspective of what kind of information people, especially the media would look for in order to create a story or tell the story better. The questions asked also gave me an idea of how the outside people view us and how we can better structure our programmes. I have learned many lessons already, one of which is that we always have to think of how we can share the story of our programmes so that we can make it easier for the media to tell it to the masses. I also came to realize that journalists can be used to tell scientific stories provided it is explained to them in an understandable form." Perry Ngoma, CropLife Zambia

"I have enjoyed interacting with the journalists because they ask questions that cover angles not usually thought about. To me I regard journalists as a source of new ideas and would love to interact with them much. The worry that I have, is about whether I was reaching them with what I was talking about. We usually do not get opportunities to talk to people about our work, more so the journalists. There is always much to talk about and so one could easily have gone off course. Other wise it was a wonderful opportunity to try and reach out to others on issues that most people are ignorant about." John Musanya, Zambia Agricultural Research Institute

"The majority of the group seemed to lack a basic knowledge of agriculture outside of planting a few maize seeds in the ground. It was therefore an opportunity to expand their thought processes on the attempts of commercial agriculture to achieve a sustainable approach which could be transmitted to small scale producers. In future, I would definitely make sure that I did not give too much/ technical information, as I think I did cause some confusion when I became too detailed and technical. In terms of future interaction with the media, I would still be nervous, unless I had some form of guarantee of veto. I have seen too many times where misquotes have occurred, or text has been left out, putting comments out of context. This, I feel, is due to the lack of professionalism and experience, which is, of course, what your course was trying to correct." John Henderson, York Farm

"I feel the information that I gave to the journalist is educative to the masses in the country and world at large. This is the only way I can share knowledge with fellow farmers and would-be farmers. It was a great opportunity for me. I feel differently now, because I will be sharing my knowledge with people via the media, which when taken seriously, can grow our economy." Beatrice Mwape, York Farm

"It was a good experience, disseminating information to the nation and region. Our soil reporter has actually already presented the programme and I felt very good to listen to myself talking and with valuable detail. Three factors came out for me. Good communication skill, good listener and truthful reporting is what makes a journalist who he is. Knowledge shared is better than denied. Whatever information I shared to nation if put to good use can add extra monies in people's pockets. I crave for more visits so that we can cover other operations." Lister Nyemba, York Farm

Annex 1a: Journalists attending training

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| Catherine Chisompola, Radio Icengelo, Zambia | Email: caitphiri@yahoo.com |
| Darlington Kahilu, National Agriculture Info Service, Zambia | Email: dakahilu@yahoo.co.uk |
| Friday Phiri, Yatsani Radio, Zambia | Email: friphiri@yahoo.com |
| Davison Mudzingwa, Radio Voice of the People, S Africa | Email: davvymax@yahoo.co.uk |
| Arkangel Tembo, Blantyre Newspapers Ltd | Email: kusokolotsa2@yahoo.com |
| Elita Chikwati, The Herald newspaper, Zimbabwe | Email: elita.chikwati@zimpapers.co.zw |
| Upile Ndilowe, Communication Branch, MoA, Malawi | Email: upilegirl@yahoo.com |
| Alvin Chiinga, Zambia Daily Mail, Zambia | Email: achiinga@yahoo.co.uk |

Annex 1b: Resource people

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| Philemon Sohati, Entomologist, University of Zambia |
| John Musanya, Senior Plant breeder, Zambia Agricultural Research Institute |
| Gillies Kasongo, PANOS Southern Africa |
| John Henderson, Production Manager, York Farm |
| Lister Nyemba, Assistant production manager, York Farm |
| Muchinga Silumbwe- AB Section Manager, York Farm |
| Yvonne Nakacinda, Conservation Farming Unit, Zambia |
| Lisa Sendwe, Agroforestry Farm Manager, Conservation Farming Unit, Zambia |
| Perry Ngoma, Country Coordinator, CropLife Zambia |
| Mainecy Hampeho, Coordinator of Spray Service Provider programme, Chongwe |

Annex 2a: Print outputs in AGFAX Resource: Crop protection

Print articles:

Protecting crops through healthy soils

Expanding production through chemical weed control

Zambia's Spray Service Provider programme

Using pesticides – implications for human and environmental health

Using tephrosia to tackle pests

Conservation agriculture – solving farmers' problems

Fact sheets:

Scouting for pests and diseases

Farmers' friends

Safe handling and use of pesticides

Companion planting

Annex 2b: Radio outputs in AGFAX Resource: Crop protection

Interviews

Philemon Sohati – Impact of crop pests and diseases in Africa

John Musanya – plant breeding for resistance to pests and diseases

Lister Nyemba and Jimmy Mwanza – Soil management for crop health

Lisa Sendwe – Crop rotation for pest and disease control

Muchinga Silumbwe – Farmer's friends in pest control

Beatrice Mwape – Scouting for pests and diseases

Edison Nang'ongwe – Scouting in cotton crops

Features

Vox Pop on top tips for crop protection

Minimum tillage and weed control

Deep ploughing for pest control

Waging war on weeds

Using agrochemicals – protecting human health

Using agrochemicals – safe disposal of chemicals and containers

Annex 2c: Outputs in journalists own publications and radio broadcasts

Radio reports on Radio Icengelo (Kitwe, Zambia) on conservation farming, pest management at York Farm, and CropLife's Spray Service Provider programme.

Radio reports on Yatsani Radio (Lusaka, Zambia) on crop protection in vegetable production, post-harvest protection of organic crops, and minimum tillage land preparation in conservation farming.

Articles on crop protection in Zachikumbi newsletter and other print media, Malawi

Articles in Zimbabwe Herald and allAfrica.com website on use of herbicides