

Writeshops: An effective tool to enable African academics to publish

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Communication

Increased public awareness, and the concomitant growth in political commitment to mitigation and adaptation, has made the need for accurate and relevant communication of scientific information on climate change more pressing (Fischhoff, 2011). Although much research takes place on the African continent, by African scholars or those based at African institutions, a limited amount of it finds its way into the peer-reviewed literature, which is the leading evidence base for policy and development practice, and is the dominant source of literature for major global assessments, such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and IPCC Assessment Reports. In this paper we discuss some of the reasons for such a disproportionate representation, and present promising evidence for the utility of so-called writeshops as a platform for mentoring and supporting peer-reviewed publications by African scholars to improve the situation in the short term.

Africa has fewer scientists per capita, approximately one scientist/engineer per 10 000 people, compared to 20-50 per 10, 000 in the industrialized world. (Pifer and Demissie 2009). The shortage of academic staff, combined with the necessity for researchers to fund (or supplement funding available for) their studies, means that very few African academics have the privilege of dedicating themselves full time to their postgraduate research.

Moreover, the focus of postgraduate education is on fulfilling the requirement of completion of the thesis. Hence the ancillary benefits of postgraduate training are often overlooked. This includes learning to navigate the process of publishing in the peer-reviewed literature.

The limited opportunity to learn how to publish in the peer-reviewed literature as a postgraduate student persists as graduate students become early career post-doctoral fellows and lecturers. For the PhD graduates pursue academic careers, the pressures on their time – to generate research ideas/concepts, attract grant funding, and to teach increasingly large classes of undergraduates – continue to inhibit opportunities of publishing.

In a cursory straw poll of major journals in the field of climate change adaptation, African research is woefully lacking. According to the editorial office of *Global Environmental Change*, a leading international, interdisciplinary journal (with an impact

factor of 6.868), of the 323 manuscripts accepted since 1st January 2008, 20 (6.2%) selected Africa as their “region of origin”¹ (Jennings, 2012, pers.comm). The new interdisciplinary journal WIREs Climate Change, although only in publication since 2010, has only had two papers with authors based in African institutions².

The absence of African authorship in peer-reviewed journals is particularly disappointing given the substantial volume of research that is underway on the continent. With support from a variety of multilateral and bilateral donor-led research programmes, a wealth of knowledge is accumulating around community-based adaptation strategies in agriculture, water and health sectors in Africa. For example, the Global Change System for Analysis, Research and Training (START) has a long and respected history in funding research and building the capacity of African postgraduate students in the field of climate change through programmes such as the Africa Global Environmental Change Program and African Climate Change Fellowships Program (ACCFP). Over 70 research awards have been made since 2010 from these two programs. The DFID and IDRC-funded Climate Change Adaptation in Africa program, in operation between 2006 and 2012, funded 46 research and capacity-building projects in 33 African countries, of which a substantial portion is from the ACCFP.

There have been recent calls to improve the access of African scholarship to the peer-reviewed literature (Denton et al, 2011), and that of the developing world more broadly (Rockström, 2011). In order to address this need, several organizations have been supporting targeted “writeshop” initiatives to train and build the capacity of scholars to publish in the peer-reviewed literature. The International START Secretariat has been providing training opportunities on writing for publication to recipients of its various grants and fellowships. The Stockholm Environment Institute and United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction have been sponsoring a global series of writeshops in 2011-12. Both initiatives have been very well subscribed. A number of papers in this special issue arose out of START writeshops, and a further 10 publications (to date) have been accepted in peer-reviewed journals from the UNISDR-SEI series.

In order to improve dissemination of the Climate Change Adaptation in Africa program, IDRC also recently hosted a writeshop, followed up by mentoring of specific researchers via email, skype and teleconferencing. Experience to date shows that writeshops are effective in improving the visibility of African research findings in the peer-reviewed literature.

Every year tens of thousands of African scholars work diligently with their professors to massive volumes of dissertations. These dissertation papers constitute Africa’s most

¹ Authors self-select region of origin, and thus this figure may include African scholars conducting their research or based at non-African institutions, as well as the reverse.

² Stott Peter A., Gillett Nathan P., Hegerl Gabriele C., Karoly David J., Stone Dáithí A., Zhang Xuebin, Zwiers Francis. Detection and attribution of climate change: a regional perspective. *WIREs Clim Change* 2010, 1: 192-211. doi: 10.1002/wcc.34. At the time of publication, Dáithí Stone was based at the University of Cape Town. Ziervogel Gina, Ericksen Polly J.. Adapting to climate change to sustain food security. *WIREs Clim Change* 2010, 1: 525-540. doi: 10.1002/wcc.56. Gina Ziervogel is South African and based at the University of Cape Town.

significant research and knowledge production efforts. However, most of these dissertations never get published in peer-reviewed journals and remain largely inaccessible.

There is an opportunity to focus workshops at unpublished dissertations, which have direct relevance to policy, practice and social innovation for climate change adaptation. Working with the respective authors of unpublished thesis will offer invaluable training forum to build the capacity of African academics to contribute to global intellectual public goods.

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