

Distance Learning Course:

## Political Economy of the Environment Program for Journalists in Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe

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The broad objective of the Political Economy of the Environment (PEE) program is to equip African professionals from the public and private sectors, NGOs, academia and journalistic professionals with the knowledge and tools for analyzing development policies and investments from the perspective of sustainability, and also to spread this learning to others. The DL course was seen as one method of achieving the program's objectives using state of the art technology. Specifically, the objectives of the current activity for journalists in Africa were to: 1) impart a working understanding of the basic concepts that explain and underpin sustainable economic development; 2) empower journalists to clarify the often difficult trade-offs between economic growth and the environment facing policy makers in developing countries; 3) improve environmental journalistic skills; 4) help journalists expand their international contacts and information sources; and 5) build strategies for continued strengthening of their skills and knowledge.

The content of the training served two purposes: *first*, to cover basic methodological concepts underpinning environmental economics in order to address natural resources and environmental problems; and *second*, to develop journalistic skills in order to address environmental issues. The training design consisted of national workshops conducted simultaneously by graduates of the PEE course in three countries. Additionally, these three workshops were supplemented by four DL sessions conducted by the World Bank and external experts on environmental economics and journalism.

WBI's Evaluation Unit (WBIES) assisted with the level one evaluation by utilizing an end-of-course questionnaire to evaluate the program. Forty-eight of 53 participants completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 91 percent. A 5-point Likert type scale that ranged from 1 = minimum to 5 = maximum was used to rate respondents' reactions to each question. Following are summaries of the major evaluation findings, organized by country.

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### **Kenya (n=13)**

#### **Closed-Ended Responses**

- The mean scores of all workshop performance indicators, including relevance, benefits, design, and course logistics varied widely. All but one of the questions regarding resource persons received mean ratings above 4.0. The highest mean score was given to the *environmental economist's knowledge of the issue* (4.9), but the *journalist's knowledge of the issue* received a lower rating of 3.6. The *usefulness of the resource persons from Washington DC* was rated highly (mean=4.4). These data suggest that the respondents liked the journalists and resource persons, but were less enchanted with the journalist's knowledge of the issues raised during the course.
- The respondents indicated that the course was highly *relevant to their current work or functions* (mean=4.7) and that the *information which they acquired was very useful* (4.6). Respondents also indicated that the *course was highly relevant to their future work or functions* (4.8). Additionally, the respondents said that the activity had met one of its two primary objectives (*improving journalistic skills in environmental reporting* had a mean of 4.2), but missed on the other (*empowering journalists to clarify the link between economics and the environment* had a mean rating of 3.9).

- The *overall usefulness of the activity* was rated highly (4.5, 92% providing a rating of 4 or 5). However, *the focus of the activity on the issues which needed to be addressed* was rated lower (3.8). These responses suggest that the activity was useful for the respondents, but clearly needs improvement in its focus on more local issues.

### **DL Aspects of the Activity**

- Evaluations of the distance learning components were also mixed. The lowest mean ratings for the course were given to *the quality of the audio* (3.1) and *visual transmissions* (2.8). These low ratings were due in part to some technical difficulties experienced with the site in Kenya (they did not receive one of the three session transmissions). Respondents also had *lower ratings for the effectiveness of the distance learning technology* (3.6), but they indicated *that they did enjoy the distance learning aspects of the course* (4.3). The *course's agenda was also rated appropriate for the topic* (4.4). These data suggest that the concept of delivering this course via DL methods was well-received, but its overall effectiveness was limited.

- Additional DL questions were posed. Respondents indicated that there *was not adequate time to ask questions during the sessions* (3.2) and *that they were not able to participate actively during the sessions* (3.3). These problems were also indicated in the open-ended responses, and demonstrate the difficulties in handling three sites in three different countries simultaneously.

### **Open-Ended Responses**

- Open-ended responses were diverse. Respondents said that the most useful part of the activity was *sharing experiences with participants and resource persons in different countries*. Additionally, *clarifying the linkages between the environment and economics* was also rated as most useful. There *were no aspects that were rated least useful*; some respondents indicated that everything was useful to them.
- A few suggestions for making the videoconferences more effective were having *more hands-on sessions, and interactions with participants and resources persons*.
- Respondents indicated that they *would write more, and improved, articles on the environment and would also sensitize the public about this issue* as part of what they intended to accomplish after the activity ended.
- Additional suggestions from the respondents on improving the course included inviting the editors from their publications to courses like this, having more opportunities for question and answer sessions, and having more follow-up courses.

### **Uganda (n= 10)**

#### **Closed-ended responses**

- The overall scores from the Ugandan respondents were lower than those from the other two countries. Only three of the 32 closed-ended questions had a mean of 4.0 or more. The highest mean score was given to the *usefulness of the information acquired* by the respondents and to the *environmental economist's knowledge of the issue* (both had means of 4.2). The *relevance of the activity to the respondent's future work* was given a mean rating of 4.0 (80% rating it a 4 or 5).
- Both the *overall usefulness of the activity* and the *relevance of the activity to their country's needs* received mean ratings of 3.9, while 80% gave the former a score of 4 or 5 and 70% gave the latter a score of 4 or 5. The respondents also stated that the *relevance of the activity to their current work* was moderate (mean=3.7).
- Respondents indicated low satisfaction with the local *logistics of the activity* (mean=2.4) and for the *focus of the activity on the issues that the respondent's needed to address* (mean=3.4). On the *adequacy of the balance of time between topics*, the respondent rating was also low (mean=3.1).

- Respondent ratings suggested that the course objectives were not met (*empowering journalists to clarify the link between economics and the environment* had a mean rating of 3.6, while *improving journalistic skills in environmental reporting* had a mean of 3.7).

### **DL Aspects of the Activity**

- The distance learning aspects of the course were not rated favorably by the respondents from Uganda. The *quality of both the audio transmission* (mean=2.8) and the *visual transmission* (mean=3.2) were rated low. The *appropriateness of both the pace of the presentations* (mean=3.1) and the *agenda for the topic* (mean=3.2) were similarly viewed as low.
- When asked if they *enjoyed the distance learning aspects of the activity*, the respondents gave low ratings (mean=3.4). Similarly, the effectiveness of the distance learning technology was also rated low (mean=3.3). These responses, as do the previous ones in this section, indicate that the distance learning methods of the course were not well received in Uganda.

### **Open-Ended Responses**

- The most useful part of the activity for the respondents was *clarifying the linkages between the environment and economics*. *Sharing experiences with the participants and resource persons* was also mentioned. Respondents also indicated that the Western solutions presented at the course were not necessarily appropriate to the situation in their countries. Additionally, the respondents indicated that no aspects were least useful; everything was rated useful to them.
- Respondents suggested that *more interactions between participants and the presenters*, as well as *more quality in audio and video*, would have improved the quality of the videoconferences. When asked how to improve future activities, respondents again indicated that more interactions between them and the resources persons were needed.
- *Writing more and improved articles on the environment* was one part of what the respondents intended to accomplish after the activity ended. Additionally, they stated they would also sensitize the public about the issues of economics and the environment.
- Positive comments were elicited from the respondents in the final question. Their comments indicated that the workshop was excellent. One respondent had a positive, but more reserved, reaction stating that, "*In spite of everything, this was the best workshop and most relevant one on the environment that I have ever attended in all of my six years of practicing journalism.*"

**Zimbabwe (n=25)**

### **Closed-ended responses**

- Overall, the scores from Zimbabwe were generally higher than those from Uganda and Kenya. Fifteen of the 32 closed-ended questions had a mean of 4.0 or more. One of the highest mean scores was given to the *relevance of the activity to the respondents' future work* (mean=4.4; 84% giving it a rating of 4 or 5). The *usefulness of the information acquired* by the respondents was also highly rated (mean=4.3; 80% provided a rating of 4 or 5). The *overall usefulness of the activity* and the *relevance of the activity to the respondents' current work or functions* received mean ratings of 4.2, while 80% gave both a score of 4 or 5. These responses again confirm that all three countries believe that the *relevance and usefulness of the activity* were some of its most positive features.
- The respondents stated that the *extent to which they acquired information which was new to them* was low (mean=3.5). Respondents also indicated less satisfaction with the local *logistics of the activity* (mean=3.7) and for the *focus of the activity on the issues that they needed to address* (mean=3.5). On the *adequacy of the balance of time between topics*, the respondent rating was also low (mean=3.5). These responses, as well as those from Kenya and Uganda, indicate that the logistics and focus of the activity were not as strong as some of its other features.

- The lower rating for *the environmental economist's knowledge of the realities of the respondents' countries* (mean=3.2) were confirmed in both the closed-ended and open-ended responses (as shown in the last part of this section). Although the respondents confirmed that the *economist's knowledge of the issue* was good (mean=4.1), the responses suggest that many of the economist's views were not appropriate to the needs of the respondents, nor for their countries.
- Respondent ratings suggested that the course generally met its two primary stated objectives (*empowering journalists to clarify the link between economics and the environment* had a mean rating of 4.0, 75% giving it a 4 or 5; while *improving journalistic skills in environmental reporting* received a mean of 4.1, 79% awarding a 4 or 5).

### **DL Aspects of the Activity**

- The distance learning aspects of the course were rated more favorably by the respondents from Zimbabwe. When asked if they *enjoyed the distance learning aspects of the course*, respondents offered a mean score of 4.3, with 88% providing a rating of 4 or 5. In addition, they indicated that *the distance learning technology was effective* (mean=4.5, 90% providing a rating of 4 or 5).
- The *quality of the visual transmission* (mean=4.1) was rated higher than *the quality of the audio transmission* (mean=3.8). One respondent had positive comments on the DL aspects: "*Videoconferencing is good and should continue as it facilitates exchange of information without traveling cost and other variable costs.*" Another participant had less favorable opinions of the DL technology stating that, "*It was not impressive when we had other participants from other countries not appear on picture.*" However, the *appropriateness of the pace of the presentations*, the *ability to participate actively during the sessions*, and the *adequacy of the time to ask questions* all had lower means of 3.7. These ratings confirm the respondents' suggestions that there could have been more opportunities for interactions during the course, including more interactions with some of the presenters during the DL sessions.

### **Open-Ended Responses**

- *Clarifying the linkages between the environment and economics* was mentioned as the most useful part of the activity for the respondents. *Exchanging ideas and experiences with participants and resource persons* was also mentioned. Respondents also indicated that the Western solutions presented at the course were not necessarily appropriate to the situation in their countries. Additionally, the solutions provided by some of the presenters were rated as the least useful aspects of the course. One respondent noted, "*The examples from the West were neither applicable nor relevant to my country.*"
- Again, respondents suggested *that more interactions between participants and the presenters*, as well as *better quality in audio and video*, would have improved the quality of the videoconferences. When asked how to improve future activities, respondents indicated that some of the resource persons tended to be "*academic and theoretical*" and "*needed to improve their presentations.*"
- *Writing more and improved articles on the environment* was again one intention of the respondents after the activity ended. Another accomplishment which they expected was *to share their experiences with other journalists and to raise awareness about the issues of economics and the environment.*
- More positive comments were given by the respondents in the last question. Their comments indicated that the workshop was excellent and that they wanted more follow-up activities like this one.

### **Conclusions**

The findings varied across the three sites to which this course was delivered. The relevance and usefulness of the activity for the respondents represented some of the higher scores in each country. Additionally, the respondents' ratings of the presenters who were journalists and economists in this course were mixed. While Kenya and Uganda offered higher ratings for the environmental economists used in the

course, Zimbabwe gave lower ratings for them. Moreover, both Uganda and Kenya gave lower ratings to the journalists, while Zimbabwe's ratings were mixed.

There were also varying ratings for the DL aspects of the course. Across all three sites, some of the highest ratings were given to how the respondents enjoyed the distance learning aspects of the course. However, other aspects of the DL delivery method were put into question. These included the following interactive issues—inadequate time to participate actively during the sessions and not having enough time for questions. All three countries also gave lower ratings to the quality of the audio and video technical components in the course. Kenya was one instance of these; participants missed an entire session due to technical difficulties. The DL Unit should consider these factors in order to improve future DL courses and increase their effectiveness and reach. Overall, however, the data from the respondents suggest that the concept of delivering the course via DL methods was well-received.

One consistent view elicited by the respondents was that sharing experiences with other participants and with the resource persons was a key aspect of the course, although the respondents indicated that there was not enough time for these interactions. Also, the course's strength resided in its ability to clarify the linkages between the environment and economics. Finally, the respondents indicated that some of the Western examples used in the course were considered to be least useful since they were not applicable to their own countries.

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