



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE Centre of African
Studies



The Public Understanding of Science in Africa

Call for Papers

A workshop to be held at the British Institute of East Africa,
Nairobi, Kenya, 22-24 September 2010

Organised by the Centre of African Studies
University of Cambridge, UK

(supported by the Leverhulme Trust and Isaac Newton Trust, Cambridge)

with the British Institute of East Africa, Nairobi and The London School of
Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Anthropologies of African Biosciences
Group

With the spread of mobile and Internet technology, the expansion of medical research sites, the development of genetically modified crops, the growing food crisis, the threat of global warming, and the challenges of particular diseases and health care, the question of how science engages publics is becoming increasingly important in Africa, as elsewhere. The workshop will bring together researchers, academics, journalists, policy makers, and those working in science education to discuss public engagement with science, and the engagement of publics by science in Africa, in scientific controversies, and through various scientific projects – environmental, medical or technological.

Policy makers often assume that ‘the public’ lacks knowledge of science, and that its members are irrational, anti-scientific, and in need of education. More recently there has been a move to understanding the public as more differentiated and more capable of engaging with science. However, such moves continue to conceive as ‘the public’ as lay citizenry separate from scientists and policymakers. Science does not necessarily engage with a freestanding public, but also creates certain publics; while some publics emerge through relations with science. Thus a public may be a group of people that forms around a particular issue, for example, a conservation project, a health issue, or an issue of access to particular resources. Science gains legitimacy through public engagement, but what is the nature of this engagement, and what ethical issues arise?

The workshop will discuss the following questions: What debates are African publics engaging in, in relation to science and policy-making and scientific debates? How is science in Africa engaging with publics, whom do these publics consist of and how are they conceived? Are particular publics emerging in relation to scientific issues? What do public engagements with science in Africa tell us about opportunities for participation in decision-making, policy and public debates? What relationships exist between the various publics involved and various actors, from the state to international scientific research groups, pharmaceutical companies, NGOs and UN agencies? What do these reveal about the meanings of citizenship and the development of networks of concerned actors in relation to scientific issues, as well as the ability of particular communities to shape or affect scientific policies that concern their livelihoods?

We welcome papers or media presentations. The list below is intended as a guide and is by no means exclusive.

Panel One: Science, Medicine and public health

Possible topics

Media reports on health and medicine

Medical research and the engagement of publics

Public health campaigns

Global disease programmes and their publics

Panel Two: Conservation and the environment

Possible topics

Public engagement with conservation projects

Public understanding of climate change; water resources; deforestation;

Foreign states buying land in Africa to cultivate food

Environmental degradation and migration

Media reports on climate change issues in Africa

Panel Three: Science, technology and development

Possible topics

Implications of expanding mobile phone technology and Internet access

Debates about genetically modified crops

Development of sustainable energy sources

Development of sustainable technology

We welcome abstracts, a maximum of 250 words, and expressions of interest from researchers, journalists, science educators, scientists, policymakers and academics. Deadline for abstracts is 1 May 2010

Please contact the Centre via email conference@african.cam.ac.uk