

UNEP co-organises Africa Regional Training Programme on Communications and ABS (Access to Genetic Resources and Benefit Sharing)

Nairobi , 9 - 12 March 2009

UNEP in partnership with the German – Dutch Africa Capacity Building Initiative for Africa organised a regional hands-on training programme on communications and ABS in Nairobi. This training session was attended by over 50 participants, representing some 30 countries, from throughout Africa. This was the first dedicated training session focusing on the issue of communication and ABS and forms the core of activities to help countries better negotiate and agree on the international regime on ABS by 2010.

The training programme had three objectives. The first was to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between ABS experts and professional communicators. The second was to develop a set of recommendations for ABS communication, education and public awareness (CEPA) at a political level and the third was to plan actions for ABS CEPA to ensure ABS messages are better communicated amongst different stakeholders. It was highlighted during the inaugural addresses that there have been “more frustrations than jubilations” in the field of ABS and that it was important to get the media on board in order that ABS discussions are positioned in such a way to raise awareness on this complex and multi-faceted, multi-dimensional issue.

The first group exercise, that set the tone for the rest of the workshop, focused on ABS experts and communication experts challenging each other on key issues. It was an animated discussion with both groups providing suggestions as to how ABS could be communicated and how each of the group sees the other as a key player with limited inputs into each others work at national level. Parallel sessions were held on the themes of ‘Influencing Strategies and Skills’, ‘Strategic Cooperation with Journalists and the Media’ and ‘Strategic Communication for Sustainable Development’ which placed ABS at the core of the discussions in a skills training session.

These skills were then utilized when a selection of workshop participants summarised the challenges they and their stakeholders encountered when dealing with ABS issues and key messages that policy makers should know about in their discussions on ABS. In light of the skills training and presentations made by select participants, the groups were asked to act as communication consultants to advise one stakeholder representative on how best to tackle their specific ABS problem. Few stakeholder groups such as CBD secretariat, national focal points, business community, NGOs and local communities and negotiators were identified as the key stakeholders to communicate the ABS messages. Simulations were held between the representatives of each of the group and their communication consultants to come up with few key messages on ABS for each stakeholder group to use.

The participants recognised that the workshop’s structure and interactive nature were a novel way of forming recommendations. They also felt that the sharing of knowledge between participants was very energising and that ABS had been

highlighted as a tool for poverty alleviation and conservation in addition to being a CBD agenda item. It was felt that the workshop illustrated the importance of targeted communication, that capacity building had been shown to be possible and that the real meaning behind the technical vocabulary encapsulating ABS had been exposed. The use of role-play to highlight other people's point of view was applauded and it was deemed that the workshop had highlighted the shortcoming of participants with regard to the transmission of knowledge in non-technical terms.

It was agreed that the profile of communication within the ABS process had been raised and furthermore, it was considered that the potential for communication to lay the foundation for ABS legislation at national level had been shown. The workshop was considered a success as it had taught veteran ABS negotiators from the region to look at ABS from new perspectives on influencing and communicating ABS more effectively.

UNEP will further elaborate the work undertaken by the participants in Nairobi during the coming months to design a communication and ABS tool kit in partnership with the Initiative and CBD Secretariat. UNEP will also be hosting a side event on the outcomes of this training programme during the meeting of the seventh Ad Hoc Open Ended Working Group on ABS, to be held in Paris between the 1st and the 8th April 2009. Additionally, UNEP will make efforts to replicate the training session in other regions, funding permitting.

Detailed report and outcomes of this workshop will be made available on this page soon.

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