



Developing Successful Research Proposals

Workshop report

**Catholic Redemptorist Centre, 31st August to 3rd September 2010,
Ibadan, Nigeria**

The workshop was organised by
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and formed part of the project
**“Developing Research Capacity among African Environmental
Scientists”**

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Developing Research Capacity among Africa Environmental Scientists,
is a collaboration involving the following partners and countries:



The Tropical Biology Association, United Kingdom and Kenya



Zoology Department and the Faculty of Forestry and Nature Conservation,
Makerere University, Uganda



Nature Kenya and National Museums of Kenya, Kenya



The University of Ghana, Ghana



Nigerian Conservation Foundation, Nigeria

The project is funded by the
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Executive Summary

The first of a series of training workshops forming part of EU-funded project entitled “*developing research capacities among African Environmental Scientists*” in Nigeria took place from 31st August to 3rd September 2010 at the Catholic Redemptorist Centre, Ibadan. The workshop trained Nigerian scientists on how to plan and write winning research proposals. Training themes covered included getting work funded; proposal writing skills; decoding (grant) application forms and making an impact; and finding money and follow up support for participants. The 18 participants represented 10 institutions including universities, research institutes, NGOs and government departments.

The workshop received extremely positive comments on the quality of instruction and relevance. Participants received guidance on how to improve research proposals they brought to the workshop with the aim of submitting them for funding in future, and set personal targets that they will work on for the next 6 to 12 months. Participants also received resources (workshop handouts and TBA’s “Fundraising guidelines” skills series) that will ensure they continue to apply skills learned. The participants indicated their desire to use their new skills to train others at their institutions afterwards. Presenting certificates to the participants, Dr Alade Adeleke of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, asked participants to apply what they learned in their work, adding that it is only by practising that they will improve their own writing skills.

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““For me, the workshop is a dream come true. Learning all these great skills from seasoned professionals is indeed a rare privilege. It has greatly enhanced my confidence and skills...”

(Workshop participant)

Introduction

African environmental scientists play an important role in developing scientifically sound policies needed for sustainable natural resource management and poverty reduction. The aim of the workshop was to build the capacity of Nigerian scientists and their institutions in planning and writing successful research proposals. It represents the first of a series of training workshops forming part of a 3 year, EU-funded project entitled “developing research capacities among African Environmental Scientists”.

The 18 participants trained represented 10 institutions including universities, research institutes, NGOs and government departments (Table 1).

Table 1: number of participants by institutions

Institution /Department	# participants
Federal University of Technology, Akure, Ondo State, Nigeria	3
Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria	1
Ministry of Forestry, Ogun State, Nigeria.	1
National Horticultural Research Institute	2
Nigerian Conservation Foundation	1
Nigerian Institute for Oceanography and Marine Research	2
University of Ado- Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria	1
University of Benin	1
University of Ibadan	1
University of Lagos	5
Grand Total	18

Facilitators for the workshop were drawn from Nigerian Conservation Foundation, the Tropical Biology Association (TBA), and the University of Lagos, Nigeria (appendix 1).

The training was highly participatory and involved discussion and practical exercises as well as informal presentations and the participants remained engaged throughout. Participants brought research proposals in early stages of development and received advice and comments from the trainers during the workshop. All the trainees set personal targets detailing how they will follow through with their proposals in the next 6 to 12 months. It is expected that the participants will share their new skills with colleagues or engage in active fundraising at their institution, afterwards. In addition to the workshop’s training handouts, participants received copies of the TBA’s “Fundraising guidelines” skills series specifically designed for this workshop. The guidelines will be developed further and will form part of the research toolkit that the project will publish.

Workshop opening

The workshop was officially opened by the Director of the Centre for Sustainable Development, University of Ibadan, Prof. Labode Popoola accompanied by Prof. Emmanuel Obot (the NCF’s Executive Director). In his key note address (annex 1), Prof. Popoola noted that Nigeria’s development has slackened despite the country’s immense human capacity today, and potential at independence. He highlighted inadequacy of research funds, non-utilization of research output by end-users, poor or total lack of mentoring, and lack of knowledge among researchers in the fund sourcing process as some of the key hurdles in realised the impact of research in Nigeria. Prof. Popoola reminded participants that “getting a grant is hard work” but they “must brace up to the challenges of delivering good quality research and research output”. He challenged researchers to learn how to access funds in a competitive world adding that “the funds are there, though limited. Only the best will get it.”

Giving the overview of the training, Dr Rosie Trevelyan (Director of the Tropical Biology Association) noted that the workshop was designed around talks, case studies, discussions and practical exercises. She asked participants to maximise interaction and share experiences noting that by working together one is likely to gain more. She added that though the workshop will be intensive, participants will get time to work on their own proposals. She ended by noting that the workshop will be informal and that she hoped that the participants will enjoy it and come out enthusiastic and empowered.

Workshop content and themes

The workshop covered four themes during the four days. These are: getting work funded; proposal writing skills, presentation skills, and finding money and follow up support for participants (see appendix 1 for the training programme).

Day 1: Fundraising skills

In addition to raising funds to support priority research and conservation work, scientists are increasingly required to fundraise to supplement institutional budgets. This module taught essential skills of “how, when and where” to ask for money. Participants shared their experiences on sources of funding they have targeted and the barriers they faced in fundraising. Many of the barriers were tackled during the workshop through talks on how to go about fundraising.

The day’s exercise saw participants review funding proposals and in the process learn key features that make proposals successful. Dr Alade Adeleke presented a case study of funded conservation projects in Nigeria.

Day 2: Proposal writing skills

The module focused on skills in writing research and conservation projects. After listening to a talk on writing research proposals, participants were engaged in a practical on how to go about responding to a funding call. The practical required participants to apply what they learnt from the talk and translate sections of proposals they had developed to match a call from a specified grant.

The overall learning for the day was how to structure a funding proposal including the levels of details required for different components of a research proposal. The importance of having a logical flow throughout the proposal was emphasised. Specific sections of focus were the introductions (how to write project background, problem statement and justification) and objectives. Additional discussions were held on writing project methods with participants being encouraged to think of how the data they collect will be analysed.

A session on writing skills outlined the importance of brevity and clarity. Participants were shown examples of good practice and bad practice and discussed how to ensure their writing conveyed the right message.

Finally, participants worked on proposals they brought to the workshop and received one-to-one advice and reviews from the workshop trainers. At least 3 proposal review sessions (or approximately 4.5 cumulative hours) were provided for in the workshop programme.

Day 3: Decoding the application form and making an impact

Poor presentation of one’s application can kill a good project. In addition to hearing how to prepare and present budgets, participants learned how to decode application forms including demystifying donor terminologies and project log frames. The focus here was on general conservation research projects that tend to follow a slightly different suite of components from a purely academic research proposal covered on day 2.

An open question and answer session allowed participants to seek clarification on past presentations as well as highlight new topics and areas not included in the programme so far. The day closed with a general discussion on building a successful fundraising profile. The discussion was borne out of the realisation that the ability to write well, alone, is not enough in fundraising but individuals need to learn to network and collaborate with each other.

Day 4: Finding money and the way forward

Participants were taken through the sources of project funding available to them. This involved pointing them to top funding opportunities that are easy to access as well as how to identify relevant funders. Other sources of funding not yet covered by the workshop were discussed including donors and corporates. This was followed by a practical on how to market one’s work in limited time. Participants then took stock of lessons learnt and set personal targets for the next six months after the workshop. The TBA committed to provide follow up to help participants realise their targets. Participants were informed that they will all be enrolled in the TBA contact database and receive follow up support through the TBA alumni desk in Nairobi. Participants were encouraged to send their proposal to TBA who will engage mentors to help review and improve the proposal for submission. The TBA pointed out that it has a wide network of experts who are willing to provide mentorship but cautioned participants to go through the entire mentorship process as dropping halfway through will be a waste of time and energy and a big let down to the mentors.

Finally, participants were encouraged to continue, but also strengthen, the networking resulting from the workshop. While TBA was open to follow up requests at all times, participants will receive regular circulars to check progress with the targets, but more important, to ensure that no one feels left out and that each one gets the support they deserve.

“A rare opportunity for young scientists ...It is one of the best participatory [workshop] I have ever seen in my life”

Workshop participant

Workshop assessment

The workshop received extremely positive comments on the quality of instruction and relevance of the workshop. Overall, the workshop and teaching were rated as 1.1 on a scale from 1 (excellent) to 5 (very poor). 14 out of 17 respondents said the balance between talks and practicals/discussions was “about right”.

Participants rated their knowledge and skills in scientific writing and publishing before the workshop as 3.2 and after the workshop as 1.1 on a scale of 1 = a lot; 2 = a moderate amount; 3 = a little and 4 =not at all. All respondents said they were “very likely” to apply the lessons learnt at their work stations.

Participants	Workshop score	Teaching score	Correct balance between talks & practicals	I am “very likely” to apply what I learned
17	1.1	1.1	82%	100%

Beyond following through with their individual targets, most participants indicated their desire to train others at their institutions in the skills learned during the workshop. A sample of comments received on the workshop is given below:

“The workshop has indeed showcase the need for engaging young scientists and equipping them on the technical and management skills needed for a successful proposal writing”

“It is really an eye opener. Overall new skills, knowledge and abilities have been acquired. Changed my original perspective on writing research proposals to one which I can build on to aid my progress and development”

“I hope that the network will provide opportunity for team work on our research areas...”

Closing of the workshop

The closing remarks were delivered by Dr Alade Adeleke of the Nigerian Conservation Foundation. In his speech, Dr Adeleke thanked the participants for their efforts during the workshop. He asked participants to apply what they learned in their work, adding that it is only by practising that they will improve their writing skills.

The workshop closed with Dr Adeleke and Prof. Akisonji presenting certificates to the participants.

Acknowledgements

The workshop was funded by the European Union’s ACP Science and Technology Programme contract no. FED/2009/218783: 28 Jan 2010. We would like to thank all those in Nigeria and from the TBA involved in the planning of the workshop, and the participants who made the workshop such a success. We thank institutions that provided their staff for training and hope that when the staffs return, they will do things differently and work to apply the skills and knowledge gained from the workshop to grow the profile of their respective institutions by writing better research proposals.

Appendix 1. Workshop programme: Developing successful research proposals

31 Aug 2010	Getting your work funded
09:00	Welcome and introductions (OT)
09:15	Overview of the training and expectations from the participants (RT) Fund Raising - people's experiences so far
09:30	Discussion and feedback by participants (AK)
10:00	Opening ceremony (OT) Welcome speech (EO) Key note address and official opening (LP) DRECA project and workshop aims (RT) Final remarks (AA)
10:40	Group photo
10:50	<i>Coffee break</i>
11:15	Talk: How to go about fundraising for your project (RT)
12:00	From theory to practice: Practical on funding proposals (RT)
13:30	<i>Lunch</i>
14:30	Feedback on practical [review of funding proposals] (RT)
15:20	Case Study: example of funded conservation project(s) in Nigeria (AdA)
15:45	<i>Tea break</i>
16:15	Proposal session: assessing and collating participants work (OT/AK)
16:45	<i>Day close</i>
1 Sept. 2010	Proposal writing skills
08:30	Talk: Writing a scientific proposal (AdA)
09:15	Case study: example of a research funded project in Nigeria (AA)
10:00	Practical: how to respond to a funding call/announcement (AA/TBA)
10:10	<i>Working Coffee break/ Practical:</i> how to respond to a funding call/announcement
12:30	Practical feedback: responding to a funding call (AA)
13:00	<i>Lunch</i>
14:00	Practical feedback: responding to a funding call, cont'd Comments on responding to funding calls (AA)
15:15	<i>Tea break</i>
15:45	Talk: Top tips on writing skills (RT)
16:30	Proposal session: working on own proposals (all)
17:30	<i>Day close</i>

2 Sept. 2010		Decoding the application form
08:45		Talk: presenting budgets (AK)
10:00		Talk: preparing log frames (AA/AdA)
10:30		<i>Coffee break</i>
11:00		Talk & discussion: De-coding the application form (RT)
12:00		Questions and answer session (All)
13:30		<i>Lunch</i>
14:30		Proposal session: working on own work (all)
15:30		<i>Tea break</i>
16:00		Feedback: responses to questions asked during the 'Q&A' session
16:30		Discussion: building a success fund-raising profile (AK)
19:00		<i>Dinner</i>
20:00		Proposal session: working on own work (all)
22:00		<i>Day close</i>

3 Sept. 2010		Finding money
08:40		Talk & discussion: Where to get the money (AK/AA)
09:30		Talk: other fundraising strategies (RT)
10:00		<i>Tea break</i>
11:00		Practical and feedback: making an impact (RT)
11:30		Putting it into practice: lessons learned & personal targets for the next year (RT)
11:40		Feedback: lessons learned & personal targets for the next year (RT)
12:30		Follow up Support: Information for participants
		Workshop assessment (AK/OT)
13:00		Closing remarks, presentation of certificates (AdA/AA)
13:30		<i>Lunch and departure</i>

Teachers and resource people

Dr Rosie Trevelyan (RT)	Director, Tropical Biology Association
Mr Anthony Kuria (AK)	Project Manager, Tropical Biology Association
Prof. Aderopo Akinsoji (AdA)	University of Lagos
Dr Alade Adeleke (AA)	Nigerian Conservation Foundation
Mrs Oluwafunmilola Tsewinor (OT)	Nigerian Conservation Foundation
Prof. Labode Popoola (LP)	Director, Centre for Sustainable Development, University of Ibadan
Prof. Emmanuel Asuquo Obot (EO)	Executive Director, Nigerian Conservation Foundation

Annex 1. Workshop opening – keynote address

**Keynote Address at the Training Workshop on *Developing Successful Research Proposals*
Jointly Organized by the Nigerian Conservation Foundation and the Tropical
Biology Association at Ibadan, Nigeria Tuesday 31 August to Friday 03 September, 2010**

by

Professor Labode Popoola

Director, Centre for Sustainable Development, University of Ibadan

The Executive Director, Nigerian Conservation Foundation

The Leadership of Tropical Biology Association

Distinguished guests

Cherished Participants

Ladies and Gentlemen

Research and Sustainable Development in a changing world

First, let me appreciate the organizers of this very important workshop for inviting me to deliver a keynote address on a subject that I consider very important and which I am very passionate about. I also need to congratulate the NCF and the TBA for their sustained efforts at research and development in the realms of Environment and Natural Resources

Sub-Saharan Africa has continually received low ratings in the context of human development indices. Of all the Sub-Saharan African countries, Nigeria is perhaps, the greatest paradox of our time as far as development is concerned. The country remains no doubt a potentially great country, with a population estimated at 150 million people and a huge natural resource endowment, begging for sincere exploration and exploitation for sustainable development. The aspirations of the Nigerian government are to raise the Nigerian economy to be among the 20 top economies of the world by the year 2020. In pursuit of this objective, the *7-point Agenda* of the current government was launched by the immediate past president. The 7 point agenda draws largely for the United Nations proclaimed Millennium Development Goals.

The key areas of the 7-point Agenda are:

- Infrastructural Development
- Development of the Niger Delta Region
- Food Security
- Human Capital Development and Empowerment
- Land Tenure Changes and Home Ownership
- National Security
- Wealth Creation.

On the surface, these are laudable dreams and all the ingredients for sustainable development are encapsulated. However, they will require a great deal of efforts to realize.

Development must involve two basic processes. The first has to do with improving and refining that which is already in existence and adapting it to contemporary requirements. The second process involves finding solutions to new problems or new forms of solutions to old problems. Both imply creative responses to social, political and economic affairs. Specifically, sustainable development suggests an enduring, remarkable, non-terminal improvement in the quality of life, standard of living and life chances of the people. Such development must be capable of surviving generations over a prolonged period of time. It favours a progressive curve in human development encompassing enhanced creativity, for increased productivity. To achieve these, research is germane and has to be taken most seriously.

It has long been established globally that research is the driving force in sustainable development. Many nations have advanced, simply because they have availed themselves of advantages inherent in cutting-edge research. The Asian Tigers who were at the same level of development with Nigeria, and indeed most Sub-Saharan African countries at independence have now joined the league of advanced economies through research and prudent utilization of research results.

Research is a tool for producing knowledge and the general purpose is to raise the overall amount of knowledge known about a particular subject, so it feeds well into education and societal needs. Research is part and parcel of resource development, management and utilisation and it enables us to tap strategically into natural resources for our development needs, and then enables us to re-invest in the resource to sustain its availability. Investing in research is very similar to, and complementary to investing in education. The former generates knowledge while the latter is a tool for sharing knowledge. In an ideal situation, the two are mutually supporting. Education influences change in society, and likewise, society influences changes in education. Good education raises the level of knowledge about a specific area, enabling society to better analyze, make choices and take appropriate actions. Likewise, the experiences of society influence institutions of learning as well as the learning experiences by putting into context what happens when certain knowledge is put into action in a particular circumstance. So, education and research on one hand and society on the other continue to shape each other, achieving a dynamic synergy.

All over the world, leadership in research is provided by universities and specialized research institutes. However, in spite of the qualified levels of investment in higher education by governments at State and Federal levels in Nigeria, the impact has been sub-optimal. Several reasons have been adduced for this. They include:

- Inadequacy of research funds in the subventions to universities and research Institutes.
- Poor timing in the releases of the meagre funds allocated
- Non-utilization of research output by end-users due to poor linkage between the Town and the Gown.
- Poor, and in some cases completely lack of mentoring on the part of senior faculty/researchers
- Misuse/diversion of research funds to unintended uses by some researchers and/or host/coordinating institutions.
- Inadequate knowledge of researchers in the fund sourcing process for cutting-edge research

A combination of these factors has led to the emigration of brilliant and talented faculty and budding researchers to other countries and continents where they are better appreciated and utilized. In recent times however, and in a bid to assist needy countries out of poverty, several developed economies have made conscious efforts at providing funds in the form of grants for training and research. Unfortunately, evidence abounds of a high level of underutilization of such funds; partly due to inadequate knowledge of potential grantees about such grant providers and their requirements, as well as a skill gap in writing competitive proposals. Similarly, Nigeria and many other developing countries are lagging behind in the areas of basic amenities of life and hence good quality of life. This fact is a function of the combination of many factors. Principal among these is our low level of research, access to, and level of utilization of research output. In a knowledge-driven world where technology is advancing at almost the speed of light, developing countries would have no excuse to remain in perpetual abject poverty. For the situation to change for the better, Universities and Research Institutes with mandates for research in specific areas of the economy will have to brace up to the challenges of intensifying research activities with the view to solving the myriads of problems prevailing in our countries.

The inability to transform research results to practical applications for development is one of our main weaknesses. The main challenges are in problem diagnosis and in setting the objectives of our research. Information abound on many great research ideas that have emanated from Nigeria and other developing countries that have been transformed into multi-billion dollar endeavours.

There is therefore, the need to make research output work better for development, through effective research. We have to leverage the intellectual capacity of our scientists to generate knowledge and innovate meaningfully for sustainable development. We are however, not doing enough today, and our reasons for that are lame. We have the task of demonstrating that research really works for development. This should create the demand for research.

Getting a grant is hard work. There is a lot of competition for the meagre resources available from donor/funding agencies and this imposes very high standard of evaluating the application for funding of research proposals received. Though grants are generally perceived to be “free” in that you do not have to pay back the money **Sponsors view grants as investments in an improved future**. That is why when grants are awarded periodic programme and/or financial reports to the funding organization are mandatory. Many research grant winners have failed in this regard and this has led to sanctions. The researcher therefore, needs to follow a step-by-step process in the search for funds and play by the rule. This takes time and persistence to succeed.

To be a successful grant writer, it becomes expedient to be able to reflect the “priorities” of the sponsor. Too often, grant applicants focus on their own need for funds instead of matching their projects with the sponsor’s priorities. It is therefore important that as grant seekers we should select sponsors that share our views of the world and tailor the research proposals to them. The advice here is that we *think globally and act locally*

Successful grant making entails being computer literate and internet compliant. It is therefore advisable that as grant seekers we need to train and re-train ourselves in mastering the use of computers. This will surely enhance grant-seeking skills and capacities.

I understand that this workshop is the first in a series of training workshops to be held in Nigeria as part of an EU ACP Science and Technology Project - *Developing Research Capacity among African Environmental Scientists (DRECA)*. Gladly also, I note that DRECA is a collaboration involving Makerere University, Uganda, University of Ghana, Legon, National Museums of Kenya, Nature Kenya, Nigerian Conservation Foundation and the Tropical Biology Association. These two great African Universities have for over sixty years had a close bond with the University of Ibadan, Nigeria where I have the privilege of working and leading research and research-related activities over the past several years. The Postgraduate School, UI of which I am the immediate past Dean has mounted several local, national and international capacity building programmes in research and research management and several publications have emanated from such exercises that we all need to take advantage of. As matter of fact the University hosts the Secretariat of the West African Research and Innovation Management Association (WARIMA), a research network which I expect our budding researchers to all register with. We are therefore, not necessarily starting from zero, but we need to sustain our interests and efforts in moving the frontiers of research.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, researchers must brace up to the challenges of delivering good quality research and research output. Gone are the days of research for the sake of it, or for career advancement only. Research must be meaningful, impactful and must be seen as a business that generates useful products and/or services. **Researchers must also know how to access funds in a competitive world where research and researchers are now without boundaries. The funds are there, though limited. Only the best will get it.**

I therefore implore the facilitators to make the workshop as interactive as possible and the participants to participate actively in order to realize the objectives of this very important training workshop.

Once again, I thank the organizers for this invitation and I wish all of you a wonderful and fruitful experience.

Labode POPOOLA, PhD, FFAN
Professor of Forest Economics