

# **GMASSURE Science Communication Workshop**

## **Contents**

1	Background .....	2
2	Introduction .....	2
3	Facilitators.....	2
4	Participants .....	3
5	The workshop activities .....	4
5.1	Reasons for communicating.....	4
5.2	Audience and message .....	4
5.3	How can we communicate?.....	5
5.4	Challenges journalists and participants face .....	5
5.5	Preparing media messages .....	6
5.6	Presentation by The Conversation Africa .....	6
5.7	Planning and producing writing.....	6
5.8	Delegate feedback .....	6
6	Conclusion.....	7

## 1. Background

GMASSURE is an action of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Science and Technology Programme and is funded by the European Union (EU) and the Department of Science and Technology (DST) in South Africa.

The action's objective is to assist in increasing agricultural productivity in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region by improving knowledge about, and increasing capacity in agricultural biosafety and biotechnology, and the safe use of genetically modified (GM) agricultural crops.

## 2. Introduction

In order to achieve its main objective, GMASSURE hosts workshops on a variety of topics. In order to inform audiences about food security, the safety of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the benefits of biotechnology, scientists and journalists have to build a strong network to be able to respond quickly to anti-GMO messages. In order to create a platform for participants to become more familiar with the media landscape in Africa, GMASSURE hosted a two-day science communication workshop at the Faircity Roodevallei Hotel in Pretoria on 2 and 3 September 2015.

During this practical workshop, participants learnt the value of science communication, explored the channels available for science communication, and practised writing for different audiences. This workshop helped them develop the skills necessary to inform the public, and to counter misinformation about GMOs.

## 3. Facilitators

The workshop was facilitated by Anina Mumm of ScienceLink and Prof Lesley Cowling of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Anina Mumm is a science communication and digital media consultant at ScienceLink, a company she co-founded to help scientists connect with the world. She is also cofounder and Chairperson of SciBraai, a proudly South African non-profit organisation (NPO) dedicated to science journalism, communication and outreach, and she is an active member of the South African Science Journalists' Association. She has a master's degree in Biochemistry and an honours degree in Journalism, which makes her an excellent facilitator of science communication workshops.

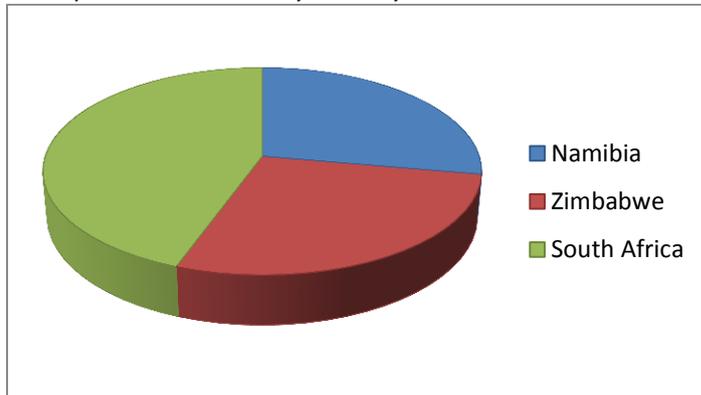
Prof Lesley Cowling is a senior lecturer in Journalism. Her research interests include media theory (public debate and journalistic professional practice) and creative writing. She has more than 20 years' experience as a journalist. She has worked as a reporter, editor, writer and designer for a wide array of publications in both South Africa and the USA. She has been science editor at the *Mail & Guardian*, assistant editor at the *Sunday Times* magazine, and a subeditor at SABC Radio News and the *Mail & Guardian*. Prof Cowling ran the *Weekly Mail* training project for entry-level journalists from 1992 to 1995.

Media guests included Sifelani Tsiko from *The Herald* in Harare, Alex Eliseev from Eyewitness News, Siphon Stuurman from SABC News, and Caroline Southey and Ozayr Patel from *The Conversation Africa*. Freelance journalist Munyaradzi Makoni provided valuable insight into writing on this platform.

## 4. Participants

Some 18 participants from South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe attended the workshop. Most of the participants were researchers in the field of biotechnology, but the group also included a regulator, a consultant and representatives from agricultural organisations.

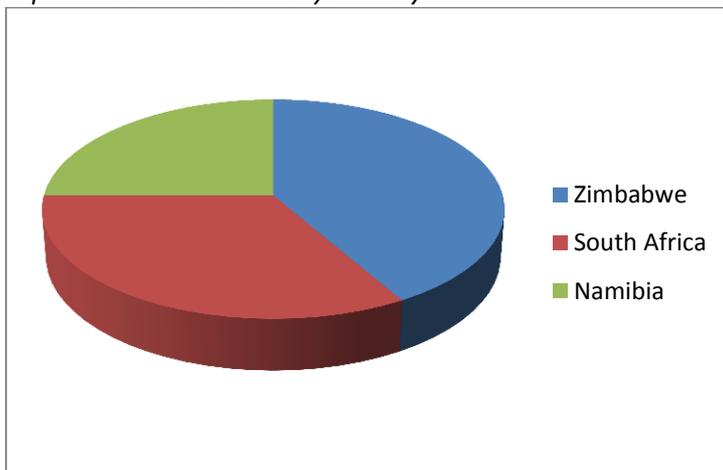
*Participant distribution by country*



In addition to hailing from three different countries, the participants represented a number of institutions. The following institutions were represented:

- The National Commission in Research Science and Technology, Namibia
- The University of Namibia, Namibia
- Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Fisheries, Namibia
- Agricultural Research Council, South Africa
- Biosafety SA, South Africa
- Department of Environmental Affairs, South Africa
- African Centre for Gene Technologies, South Africa
- National Biotechnology Authority, Zimbabwe
- Quton Seed Company, Zimbabwe
- Zimbabwe Commercial Farmers' Union, Zimbabwe
- Research Council of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe
- University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe

*Represented institutions by country*



## **5. The workshop activities**

On the morning of the first day, the facilitators spent some time introducing themselves and finding out what the participants' perceptions and expectations were. They explained the workshop's purpose and highlighted why science communication is a strategic tool for research and policy. Putting the right information in the right hands at the right time can make a significant difference in how research is viewed and adopted in society.

The participants were also given the opportunity to tell the media guests and facilitators how they view the media. During the discussion, participants highlighted that they often feel misrepresented in the media. These initial discussions laid an important foundation for the rest of the workshop.

### **5.1 Reasons for communicating**

Next, the facilitators explored a few reasons why it is important to communicate about science. These included the following:

- Much of the research performed in South Africa is funded by public money, so the public has the right to know how their hard-earned cash is being spent.
- Communicating about science helps encourage young people to pursue a career in science.
- Scientists have a duty to help create an informed public, and to prevent public hysteria concerning commonly misunderstood issues, like GMOs, by sharing and defending the facts.
- Science communication generates publicity for scientists and their institutions, which may lead to further benefits, like research funding.
- It facilitates cross-disciplinary research by helping experts in different fields to understand one another.
- African research holds a wealth of untold "good news" stories in the public interest, many of which relate to creating and finding solutions to countries' socioeconomic challenges.

### **5.2 Audience and message**

After the participants explored different reasons to communicate about science, they were given an opportunity to consider their respective audiences. A number of possible audiences were identified during a group discussion. These audiences include the public, policy- and decision-makers, farmers, retailers and consumers, and health practitioners.

Any message does not necessarily suit any audience. Science communicators should be able to match messages with their appropriate audiences. The public might want to know what GMOs are, but farmers might need to be educated about GMOs to make better-informed decisions with regard to farming practices.

The right message needs to be communicated at the right time. Participants were taught that different messages could be communicated at different stages in the research process. For example, when a research project has been identified, communicating about it may help secure funding. Scientists can communicate to potential funders about the value of the research and its potential. At this stage, it would be premature to communicate to policy-makers or the public about the research, as it is not yet relevant to them.

### 5.3 How can we communicate?

Participants learnt that they could communicate about risk, uncertainty and contentious issues like GMOs through the following platforms:

- Organisations' marketing or communication departments
- Science communicators like The Conversation Africa
- The media
- Social media
- Letter to the editor of a specific publication
- Self-publishing a blog
- Other new media platforms

### 5.4 Challenges journalists and participants face

Most of the mistrust and miscommunication between GMO stakeholders and the media can be attributed to misunderstanding. During the first day of the workshop, the facilitators started a group discussion to find out what each party experiences as challenges with regard to science communication.

Challenges that journalists face include the following:

- Researchers are often not available to speak to the media.
- Researchers do not respond fast enough and the story might lose the competition for space in publications or segments.
- Researchers fear the media.
- Journalists have to adhere to tight deadlines.
- The message is sometimes lost when too much jargon is used.

Participants found the following challenging:

- They feel that journalists sometimes distort their words or work.
- They want to be able to scientifically back what they say, which is why they do not respond immediately.
- Participants said they sometimes feel like their research is not necessarily newsworthy.
- Participants felt that the media only wants to sensationalise issues, instead of focusing on the facts.
- Sometimes, scientific research is under embargo or subject to clearance.
- Most of the time, researchers like to be prepared when they speak to the media. They do not want to be ambushed.

The facilitators led a panel discussion to help participants and the media guests talk to each other about their different experiences regarding science communication and how the two parties can help each other combat misinformation about GMOs.

The media guests took some time to explain to the participants what a typical day in their lives entails and how the process of reporting works. They explained that turnaround time for stories is short and that the pressure is immense.

Scientists and journalists are not so different from each other. Both parties find explanations and answers, value accuracy highly, and can be very competitive in their fields.

## **5.5 Preparing media messages**

The facilitators discussed a few examples of GMO stories that worked well and participants had the opportunity to pitch stories to the media guests in under 90 seconds. The media guests gave feedback on each group's story. After the participants had refined their messages, another group discussion followed. By now, participants had a solid foundation with regard to the characteristics of a good message.

Another important element of science communication is verbal communication. Some participants had the opportunity to be part of mock interviews that were conducted by radio and television journalists. They gained valuable experience in this context.

At the end of this session, participants were given a few articles to analyse and explored what makes a good story, what other writers focus on, different styles of writing, writing tactics and balanced reporting.

## **5.6 Presentation by The Conversation Africa**

On the second day, Candice Bailey and Ozayr Patel explained to the participants how collaboration between The Conversation Africa and stakeholders from the biotechnology community can help educate the public on the facts and benefits of GMOs. The participants had a discussion with them about the ins and outs of writing articles for the organisation.

The Conversation Africa was launched as a pilot project in May 2015. It is an independent source of news and views from the academic and research community, delivered directly to the public. Its team of professional editors works with university and research institute experts to unlock their knowledge for use by the wider public. It only allow authors to write on a subject on which they have proven expertise, which they must disclose alongside their article. The Conversation Africa is a non-profit, public benefit organisation.

## **5.7 Planning and producing writing**

During the last session of the workshop, Prof Cowling, with assistance from Anina Mumm and Munyaradzi Makoni, helped the participants produce a written article about GMOs. The participants had to choose an article with which they disagree from a scientific point of view or one that deserves some kind of clarification or response. They had an opportunity to apply the knowledge they had gained during the workshop.

After refining their messages, participants read their introductions aloud and received feedback from the media guests and facilitators. A group discussion followed and the workshop was concluded.

## **5.8 Delegate feedback**

After the workshop, participants were asked to complete an anonymous evaluation to determine the workshop's success. It is important to assess the workshop thoroughly so that GMASSURE can be successful in promoting sustainable agricultural practices and enhance food security across SADC.

When asked whether they thought this course would benefit them, the participants replied that it was very beneficial to learn about specific target groups and writing for them. They also indicated that the interaction with the media guests helped allay fears in terms of the media's work processes and intentions. One participant was of the view that the course enabled him to handle media matters differently and promptly.

Participants were asked to identify the most important lesson that they will take from this workshop. The responses to this question indicate that the workshop achieved its objective of teaching participants the skills necessary to inform the public, and to counter misinformation about GMOs. They noted that they now know how to communicate with the media and that they are able to formulate their messages to appeal to readers without losing meaning. Generally, the feedback indicated that the participants realise the value of collaborating with the media.

In terms of areas where GMASSURE could improve on the workshop, participants only suggested that the workshop be extended to at least three days. They felt that there was not enough time to practise the skills they had learnt. During the workshop, only some of the participants could participate in the mock interviews and the feedback suggested that all participants should be given the opportunity to do this.

## **6. Conclusion**

The GMASSURE Science Communication Workshop on 2 and 3 September 2015 aimed to achieve the objective of equipping scientists and regulators from Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe to effectively communicate their research to a variety of audiences in a way that is clear, free of jargon and non-intimidating. The workshop consisted of numerous practical writing exercises, group discussions and mock interviews.

Participants learnt more about African media landscapes and different platforms on which they could communicate their messages. Participants also learnt how important it is to build strong networks between themselves and the media. There are many similarities between the two parties, which makes building these networks easier. Some participants also noted that they were apprehensive about dealing with journalists, but their perceptions soon changed. The workshop mostly received positive feedback, but participants felt that the workshop could have been extended to three days.