

Fact Sheet 5

A publication from the DESIRE project - funded by the European Union's 6th Framework Program 'Global Change and Ecosystems'

Improving communication between researchers and the media

An example from Boteti, Botswana



Researchers from the University of Botswana were invited to make presentations on various university projects to the national media. As the Links coordinator in the Department of Environmental Science, Dr. Julius Athlopheng was one of the four selected to attend, and made a presentation about the DESIRE Project. The meeting was initiated by the organisation PANOS (linking media with academia), based in southern Africa, which is trying to extract practical recommendations from the wealth of academic research. The essence of the discussion is summarised below.

Questions asked by the media, and the Answers

Journalists and TV reporters attending the PANOS meeting asked the following questions, and received answers as follows:

Q Are there conflicts between the interests of the University of Botswana and the interests of those organisations that sponsor research? Could it happen that research might be carried out just to meet the interests of the sponsors, without meeting the research needs of the country and its people?

A The research is always intended to be in the best interests of the country as a whole, without political or economic bias. Proposals for research projects such as DESIRE are written by a consortium of representatives from international universities and other institutions. The research proposals enter a competition and must meet stringent criteria and show substantial benefits to study site countries in order to win funding from the EU.

Q How is the research publicised? How can the media obtain easy access to academic research results?

A Examples of the diverse ways in which DESIRE research results and ideas are publicised were provided at the PANOS meeting in poster format. The posters referred to the participatory workshops held by researchers with local stakeholders and policy makers from Departments such as that of Forestry and Rangeland resources, and Energy Affairs. The main dissemination platform for DESIRE research is the Harmonised Information System on the DESIRE web site, see <http://www.desire-his.eu>. This provides information in non-scientific language, including translations into DESIRE study site languages, for a wide range of users. All the material relating to study sites such as Boteti, in Botswana, is presented according to the logical sequence of research methodology.



R. Chanda, 2008

Researchers and local people attend workshops and discuss options for sustainable land use and livelihoods



The Botswana study site features in widely-circulated dissemination products such as DESIRE Newsletter 3, July 2010. See this at <http://preview.tinyurl.com/63jfa3g>

Video is a very useful medium for dissemination, and so videos are used within workshops and also integrated into the Harmonised Information System. A video providing an overall summary of DESIRE and one showing interviews with local people have both been translated into the local language.

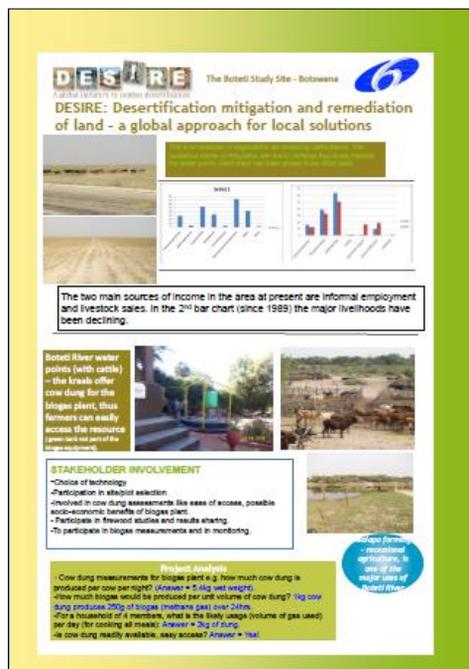
Researchers from the University of Botswana are always happy to explain their work and suggest practical recommendations for a sustainable environment, and hope that the PANOS meeting will result in a radio or TV interview.

Q Since the local people do not speak English, (the standard language of many researchers) how is knowledge made available to them?

A All six posters presented at the PANOS meeting with the media, the Boteti video, and various other dissemination products have already been translated to local languages and distributed to the Batswana people.

Q How well is the DESIRE Project research on combating land degradation related to the local context? For example, did the study begin before the Boteti Rivers started flowing again?

A DESIRE has a standard procedure for determining and documenting the context, mapping the main bio-physical and socio-economic features of each study site, and using indicators of land degradation. So yes, details of the environment before and after the Boteti River flowed have been collected and assessed. After talking with local people, DESIRE is making trials of technologies such as the promotion of bio-energy. This is to reduce the dependence on collecting wood for fuel, as improved vegetation cover can make the soil less vulnerable to erosion.



A poster about DESIRE research in Boteti, Botswana, as presented at the PANOS meeting with the media



Conclusion

Both researchers and the media realise that they can do more to reach out to one another, to share and disseminate knowledge. Researchers in Botswana have made an excellent start on providing and distributing user-friendly information, and now hope for improved media coverage.

A video, made by University of Botswana and Kabelo S. Kgwarapi, recording the views of stakeholders in Boteti. View it on: <http://preview.tinyurl.com/6k8hsoj>

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