

Environmental Scholars Bridge Policy and Practice

Joachim Ibeziako Ezeji was deeply involved in Nigeria's Rural Africa Water Development Project when he found the announcement for the 2009 Watson Scholars of the Environment Program on the Internet. The program's "academic flesh" immediately caught Ezeji's attention, he said. The residency's emphasis on land use seemed directly relevant to Nigerian aquaculture, and compelled him to "drop everything and go." Two months into the residency, Ezeji is not disappointed. "I feel I will be a better professional after this program," he said.

Ezeji is one of nine African environmental scholars and practitioners currently in residence at the Institute. Hailing from seven African countries, the scholars arrived at the Institute with diverse goals. Kawsu Jammeh, environmental education officer and project coordinator of DBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas in the Gambia, sought academic study to round out his practical and policy experience. "I don't know what's inside a university," he said. In contrast, with an academic background in archeology, researcher Susan Keitumetse traveled from Botswana to the Institute in part to enhance practical data mapping skills. The Watson Scholars program fills a different gap for Oluseun Sunday Olubode, lecturer at Caleb University in Nigeria, who said he has had little opportunity to study the policy dimensions of environmental issues.

The Watson Scholars program's combination of theoretical and practical approaches reflects the diverse backgrounds of its participants. In addition to instruction by Brown professors in both environmental science and policy, the program includes hands-on training in Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology.

GIS is still relatively new in Africa, said Mwangi Githiru, chief research officer in the Department of Research Development at Kenya's Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology. Even where resources do exist to map and analyze spatial data, GIS training opportunities are limited and facilities do not match those available in the United States, he said.

Field trips also integrate the academic and applied dimensions of environmental work, bringing the Watson Scholars to research institutes and environmental NGOs throughout New England. The Watson Scholars have already spoken with top officials, analysts, and activists at the Environmental Defense Fund, Tropical Agriculture and Rural Environment Program, and the United Nations Environment Programme.

Such site visits will advance a comparative approach to environmental change, enabling scholars to learn from the successes and failures of US



2009 Watson Scholars of the Environment with Ricardo Lagos, UN Special Envoy on Climate Change and a Brown professor at large

NGOs, said Olubode. Nigeria can learn from the environmental revolution that has taken root in the US, he added.

The intellectual exchange between the Watson Scholars and US institutions works in both directions. Throughout their residency at the Institute, the Watson Scholars work closely with Brown University undergraduates. Nineteen Brown undergraduates and two graduate students also glean insight from the Watson Scholars' on-the-ground experience as they all take a course in African Environmental History taught by Professor Nancy Jacobs, director of the Watson Scholars program.

Collaboration with Brown students has affected the Watson Scholars as well. Impressed with the students' enthusiastic participation, Yawe has become intrigued with the principles of liberal learning. She plans to hold a public discussion about pedagogical strategy upon her return to Uganda, she said.

PEOPLE

In addition, the students in Jacobs's history class will directly advance the Watson Scholars' work through related historical research projects, whose topics range from the evolution of land tenure policies in Cameroon to the role of local knowledge in Botswana's eco-tourism industry. In the words of Githiru, Brown undergraduates and the Watson Scholars have entered into a "symbiotic relationship."

A geologist by training, Ezeji said this history course addresses a blind spot in many African institutions of environmental policy. "No one talks about the future with the knowledge of yesterday," he said.

This statement may have once held true for Gaudensia Aomo Owino, research scientist at Kenya Industrial Research Institute, who said she had never before considered history to be relevant to the environment before arriving at the Institute. Now she finds the intersection between science, policy, and history "so fascinating, so stimulating," she said. Likewise in Uganda, historical inquiry into environmental problems "is not an institution. Environmental history only comes up when there is a problem," according to Hilary Bakamwesiga, assistant lecturer at Uganda's Makerere University.

The history course has changed the way Jane Nagayi Kalule Yawe thinks about her own work. A lecturer at Gulu University in Uganda, Yawe has watched people return to their homes after 20 years of war, only to find once-familiar landscapes covered in forest. Many lack the knowledge or skills to obtain resources sustainably in this new

environment. Thus, while her work on sustainable fishing practices has always been inscribed in Uganda's political and social history, Yawe and her colleagues only spoke of "the past," she said. Even when drawing on historical examples to educate people about their environmental impact, "I didn't know I was doing history," she said.

Historical study is not an academic luxury, but a way to provoke concrete change, agreed Jammeh. By providing examples of how irresponsible policy decisions have negatively impacted humans and their environment, "history can get people to act," he said.

For Cyrille Ngouana Kengne, history is where theory and practice meet. As director and environmental advisor at Cameroon's Centre for Transdisciplinary Studies in Aquaculture, Environment and Development Support and Civil Society Organizations, Kengne will employ the historical frameworks and practical skills developed through the Watson Scholars program to tackle Douala City's "obsolete" land rights policy, he said. Using GIS technology, he will chart the expansion of Douala City over time. With such a data map, he could show policy makers the impact of land use policies in concrete, visual terms, and hopefully, spur them to reform existing policies.

"The skills that I'm going to share with policymakers and activists will help them establish a better future for our land," Kengne said.

*By Watson Institute Student
Rapporteur Juliana Friend '11*

2009 WATSON SCHOLARS

- Hilary Bakamwesiga, Uganda
- Joachim Ibeziako Ezeji, Nigeria
- Mwangi Githiru, Kenya
- Kawsu Jammeh, The Gambia
- Susan Keitumetse, Botswana
- Cyrille Ngouana Kengne, Cameroon
- Oluseun Sunday Olubode, Nigeria
- Gaudensia Aomo Owino, Kenya
- Jane Nagayi Kalule Yawe, Uganda