

ESF RESEARCH CONFERENCES

Rapporteur Report

Partnership:	ESF-Africa Frontier Research Conference
Conference Title:	Dynamic Interlinkages between Social and Ecosystem Changes: Towards a Europe Africa Partnership
Dates:	8-12 November 2010
Chair:	Prof. Marja J. Spierenburg and Prof. Rashid M. Hassan
Rapporteur:	Dr. Belinda Reyers

General Comments

I really enjoyed this conference. It was different from many other conferences organised by professional societies in that it covered a diversity of disciplines, ideas, geographies and experience. I felt it was therefore a very rich conference.

I especially enjoyed the large number of student presentations with limited number of focused keynote senior scientist presentations.

I thought the themes were very well thought out and broad enough to interest the diverse audience

The chairs did a very good job of treating all ideas and presentations with respect despite their disciplinary differences

The conference was extremely well run and all the participants had to do was focus on the presentations and not have to worry about logistics or the next meal.

The presence of many expert keynote speakers was a major accomplishment and very attractive feature of the conference

Quality of Scientific Programme, Presentations and Discussion

I found the program to be of high quality in general and the chairs did a good job of managing the time constraints. The themes were a very useful way in structuring the presentations. There seemed to be a good balance between the disciplines, geography of project and nationality of speaker. I was especially impressed by the good regional representation across Africa – East, West, South and North – the latter being very rare at African conferences in general. South Africa did tend to dominate – not necessarily in study area but in institution or university as many of the African students were based there. Similarly European representation was not as representative with much participation from Western Europe. Gender was well represented (especially among the students not necessarily among the keynotes)

There were 2 areas where I think refinements would be valuable in the future. The one was that some of the talks were not appropriate – either because of their content or their quality. There was one talk that was just a PhD proposal, another was on a project in India while some others had little to do with interlinkages. I must admit that these were in the minority. But stricter guidelines on the topic, geography and focus of the conference might be useful. On the other hand a few of the posters were excellent and would have been wonderful as presentations. It is obviously hard to judge from the abstract how good a talk will be – but perhaps a requirement that all presentations showcase completed work rather than proposals is a good idea.

On the issue of quality – this will always be a challenge when dealing with a conference. I must point out that it was not necessarily the developing country scientists who had poor quality presentations, quite the opposite often. It might be useful if the conference thinks of providing assistance in the form of a course or an online document on good presentations. Language will always be a challenge and the chairs were very sensitive to this. Perhaps some thinking on how the speakers space is set up (height of lectern, position of laptop and position of screen) would help less confident speakers.

While talks covered many disciplines few were specifically interdisciplinary and this was quite a challenge as much of the debate was between the disciplines and their approaches. We clearly have a long way to go before we are truly interdisciplinary. It might also be useful to think beyond academics in these conferences and involve young scientists working in government and policy making in these interactions.

One concern I did have was the overabundance of presentations this resulted in very long days and limited time for discussion between talks. I find that the informal discussion over coffee or lunch is often the best part of these cross cutting conferences and this was a little limited by the large number of talks. I think fewer talks should be selected and perhaps only 1 or 2 keynotes a day might be enough.

Informal Networking and Exchange; Atmosphere

This was a very valuable component of the conference as mentioned above the large number of talks did limit this somewhat. I saw some very good exchanges between students and senior scientists during poster sessions, lunch and dinner and it would have been nice to see more of this rather than more talks. This is especially important if one recognises that the senior scientists often have to leave early or have other work to do while at these conferences and so chances for networking and exchange should be well planned and executed. The field trip was a good idea – but few senior scientists came along due to work commitments.

I was very impressed by the commitment of the senior scientists to spending as much time as possible with the students talking about their research and careers and from my discussions with the students this seemed a very valuable component.

The networking between students was also excellent and late night sessions in the pubs, dancing to music on a laptop after dinner etc were wonderfully pulled together by the students. The venue was a good one from this respect in that it made sure participants stayed together rather than dispersing at night to external clubs and restaurants.

The chairs did have the usual challenges of making sure the senior scientists did not dominate the discussion in the sessions. This was the case in a few instances. Similarly ensuring quieter students participate was initially a challenge but this improved as participants got to know each other. The availability of wireless in the conference room was a potential distraction at times and I did notice more people working on their laptops as the day wore on.

Balance of Participants

There was good disciplinary representation but not necessarily interdisciplinary representation

It was interesting to see the combination of nationalities at the conference – African's working in Africa, European's working in Africa, African's working in Europe but on African sites and Europeans working in Europe. This ensured a very diverse dynamic, but I think it might be useful to be mindful of these differences when selecting talks. Nationality of speakers vs. nationality of study area is a big difference to be kept in mind.

Outlook and Future Developments

This was one component that remained difficult for me to understand during the conference. While everything about the conference was very positive – it was hard to understand its purpose and future directions. At the individual level I would say useful networks and future plans were made – but as a group I am not sure that this will happen

I think a few things would have been useful in this regard. An opening address by an ESF scientist on the purpose of these conferences and possible future directions would have been a major addition. Some context on the ESF and its mandate would have been useful to. The conference was run by chairs in their individual roles, but they were not ESF representatives. This left participants a little at a loss of a broader process and goal.

There was a final session on future directions and some useful discussion, but considering the enormous diversity of people, disciplines, institutions and ideas represented it is unlikely that the group as a whole will grow into anything without someone taking responsibility for this network. This does not take away from the individual developments that I saw unfolding – but it does mean that group developments are not guaranteed. This is especially a challenge as there is no professional society behind this conference with a mandate to take this sort of thing forward

Follow-up

There were discussions about a special issue that might be useful as a follow up. Also discussions about organising a follow up conference in a years time to bring people together again. This was very unclear as we had little information on funding and plans for this. These would be useful. But my concerns listed above make this unclear.

Organisation and Infrastructure

Yes this was all excellent and I heard no complaints. Good accommodation, good food and great support by Alessandra from early morning until late at night. The only complaint was the lack of duplicate keys for people sharing rooms.

The main travel constraint was the challenges around visas for African participants. I think the next venue and planning process should keep this in mind. Hotel vouchers are always an issue and these should be issued early on together with invitation letters. When the host of a meeting is different from the venue of the meeting this needs careful planning in the visa process too.

Summary & Overall Assessment

In terms of its aim to: provide the opportunity for leading scientists and young researchers to meet for discussions on the most recent developments in their fields of research this conference was very successful. My assessment above highlights the wealth of disciplines and expertise present at the conference. Again the challenge of truly interdisciplinary work will remain a hurdle in this area of work.

In terms of its aims to act as a catalyst for creating new synergistic contacts throughout Europe and the rest of the world this conference was successful at least at the individual level if not at the group level.

About ESF Research Conferences

The Scheme

This conference is part of the European Science Foundation's (ESF) Research Conferences Scheme. The Scheme aims to promote scientific excellence and frontier level research throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Conferences aim to provide leading scientists and other participants, including young researchers, with a platform to present their work, to discuss the most recent developments in their fields of research and to network.

Conference Format

The core activities should be based on lectures by invited speakers, who are leaders in their respective fields, followed by extensive discussion periods. An informal exchange of ideas, both inside and outside the lecture room, should be encouraged, and the number of sessions in the daily timetable should be limited in order to allow sufficient time for interaction between the participants. Time should be reserved for a 'Forward Look Plenary Discussion' about future developments in the field.

Participants can take all their meals together to encourage further contact and networking, which can be particularly beneficial to younger researchers who may be less outspoken in the formal lecture room setting. In order to gain optimum benefit from the conference, both the speakers and the participants are asked to stay for the whole duration.

Division of Tasks

The Conference Chair is responsible for ensuring the quality of the scientific programme through the selection and invitation of speakers, and through the selection of participants.

The ESF Conferences Unit is responsible for managing all the logistical aspects of the conference organisation, including the provision of an on-site secretariat.

Further information: www.esf.org/conferences