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Out of Africa: The 2016 Nairobi Conference on Earth System Governance leads by example

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Bonn, 12 December 2016. Even though it was the seventh installment in the conference series, the 2016 Conference on Earth System Governance (ESG), co-hosted by the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), was a premiere. Taking place at the University of Nairobi from 7-9 December, it was the first to convene in Africa.

It was about time! Many members of the ESG research community have long engaged in empirical research in Africa. Specific issues that have drawn scholarly attention in recent years include effective participatory governance at the grassroots level, achievements in protecting the continent's unique biodiversity and related ecosystem services, a large potential for green technology development and implementation. All this paired with dynamic urbanisation and accelerating growth rates that may help lift millions of people out of poverty.

More than these successes, however, researchers keep addressing the many challenges. The world's hottest continent is particularly vulnerable to climate change, it currently exhibits deforestation rates that are twice the average of the rest of the world, and more than half of its agricultural land is estimated to be subject to land degradation and desertification.

ESG's eventual choice for Nairobi may not be that much of a surprise. It follows a pattern. International academic events in Africa typically recur to the usual conference locations in South Africa, Morocco or Tunisia and, of course, Nairobi: the hub of global environmental governance, headquartering the United Nations Environment Programme and UN-HABITAT as well as a host of regional chapters of international NGOs, research institutes and development agencies. Yet, these conferences are typically dominated by Northern scholars, as if the usual circus had just been teleported southwards for a few days.

Yet, convening at the University of Nairobi's Upper Kabete Campus and with the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies as a local host, the 2016 ESG conference avoided the pitfalls of a token conference and distinguished itself from the many conferences that almost exclusively take place in Nairobi's big convention hotels or lavish compounds of international organizations. By contrast, convening at the university campus effectively embedded the conference within a thriving scholarly environment. It also demonstrated that it is indeed feasible to host international-standard conferences at such venues. Moreover, the ESG project sought to leave a lasting footprint by sponsoring minor renovations of campus infrastructure, improved audio-systems and wireless internet facilities.

The organizers also ensured that well over a third of the some 170 conference participants were African. One of the conference's four major thematic threads was dedicated to sustainable development governance in Africa. Research institutions like the African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS), the Africa Sand Dam Foundation (ASDF), the African Technology Policy Studies Network (ATPS), the university's own African Drylands Institute for Sustainability as well as local host Wangari Maathai Institute could showcase their visions and projects in side-events and designated spotlight presentations, including a field trip to rural community projects southeast of Nairobi and an innovative research game jam with creative artists and storytellers from Nairobi. Moreover, an entire panel stream was dedicated to local early-career scholars to discuss their research, but also their working conditions and career plans.

This impressive list of initiatives will further underpin ESG credibility vis-à-vis developing country researchers and already boosted engagement of African scholars and African priorities in the pertinent global research community. Yet, there are limits to inclusiveness.

Available funds allowed for conference fee waivers, but only for very few travel grants. Thus, the vast majority of African participants unsurprisingly came from host country Kenya. It is unlikely that many of them will have the means to participate in next year's ESG conference in Lund, Sweden.

This, of course, is not a specific problem of this conference but a point in case for the Sustainable Development Goals, notably SDG 17 that calls for global partnership. Ambitious action is needed to harness scholarly exchange on sustainable development challenges in a truly global manner. Mobilizing more travel grants will not suffice. There are persistent structural issues at stake in global academia that we know too well and that, by and large, leave African researchers disadvantaged. They need to be tackled by policy-makers and donors, but also and not least by researchers themselves.

To this end the 2016 ESG conference in Nairobi was a small, but significant step, providing not merely a platform for a couple of days but new perspectives, new knowledge and maybe even new and sustainable collaborations between African scholars and the rest of the research world. More than a few renovations at the local university campus, this may be the major legacy of the ESG conference: showing what is possible to truly globalize academic networks for the benefit of sustainable global development.