

Exploring scientific literacy through science cafes

By AGATHA NGOTHO

The world continues to explore new ideas on increasing scientific literacy and bridging the gap between science and society.

Countries like Kenya included, have embraced a new model of science communication known as science café or café scientifique. "A science café is a forum for discussing or debating important and interesting scientific issues in an informal approachable manner," Ruth Wanjala, Kenya Science Café co-ordinator says.

The science café or café scientifique is modelled after the café philosophique movement that was started by French philosopher Marc Sauter in 1992.

She explains: "A science café provides a unique forum for the discussion of topics and thought-provoking scientific issues in a relaxed, informal and accessible manner. It is designed to promote group discussion led by an invited speaker on a topic that is then debated by the participants."

Typically, here in Kenya regular meetings are organised in a coffee house or any other informal setting where one

or several scientists are invited to talk in a layman's terms about their work in a topical or even controversial area.

As Juliette Muñeru aslo a co-ordinator of the science café in Kenya says, "stupid questions" are very much in order during these sessions. "Anyone can ask a question and questions that begin with "This might be a stupid question, but ..." are positively welcome. These questions are invariably not stupid and often rather insightful."

The events are known for their informal and friendly atmosphere and aim to demystify scientific research for the general public and empower non-scientists to more comfortably and accurately assess science and technology issues, particularly those that impact on social policy-making.

Science cafes meet regularly to hear scientists or science writers talk and discuss their work with diverse audiences. They also explore the latest ideas in science and technology to promote public engagement with science in an endeavour to make science more accountable.

According to Wanjala, there are also junior science cafes specially formed for young people and school-going children.

"Normally junior science cafes are incorporated through science clubs but so far we have not had the chance to introduce the initiative in schools. However, we hope to do that by May this year," says Wanjala.

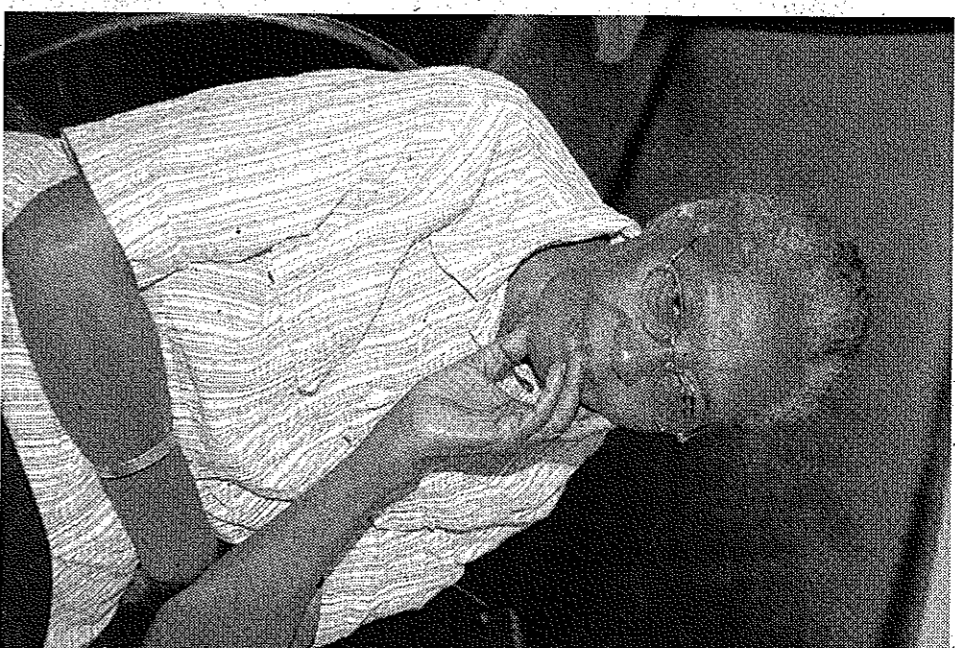
She adds: "Science cafes are held every month with a scientific issue. Normally, participants are given an evaluation sheet to select issues they would like discussed in the next edition. We then decide on the topic and invite experts to instigate the session."

So far, Kenya has held two science cafes since beginning of the year. The first one on "Child Mortality" was held in January, led by Professor Fred Were, Kenya Paediatrician Association and Dr Mike English.

Late last month, male circumcision was the topic of the day at "The Mug coffee house" in Nairobi. The next one is on women health and everyone is welcome according to the organisers.

Audience

The Café Scientifique initiative currently runs in 42 cities, the first African science café was launched in South Africa during the SASOL Scifest as *Wozani Sikhulume Science* (Come let's talk about science).



A participant follows a discussion during a recent science cafe forum

Audiences consist of people who are interested in science but generally never have the opportunity to discuss their views with, and ask questions of, someone "in the know". No scientific knowledge is assumed by the speakers, so anyone can participate.

Venue

Science cafes are often held away from traditional academic/conference kind of settings. Meetings have taken place in cafes, bars, restaurants and theatres, among others.

Subjects for discussion

Audience members are however welcome to suggest particular topics for discussion. Some of the most interesting issues in Kenya today range from environment, nutrition, agriculture and reproductive health issues.

What happens at a Science café?

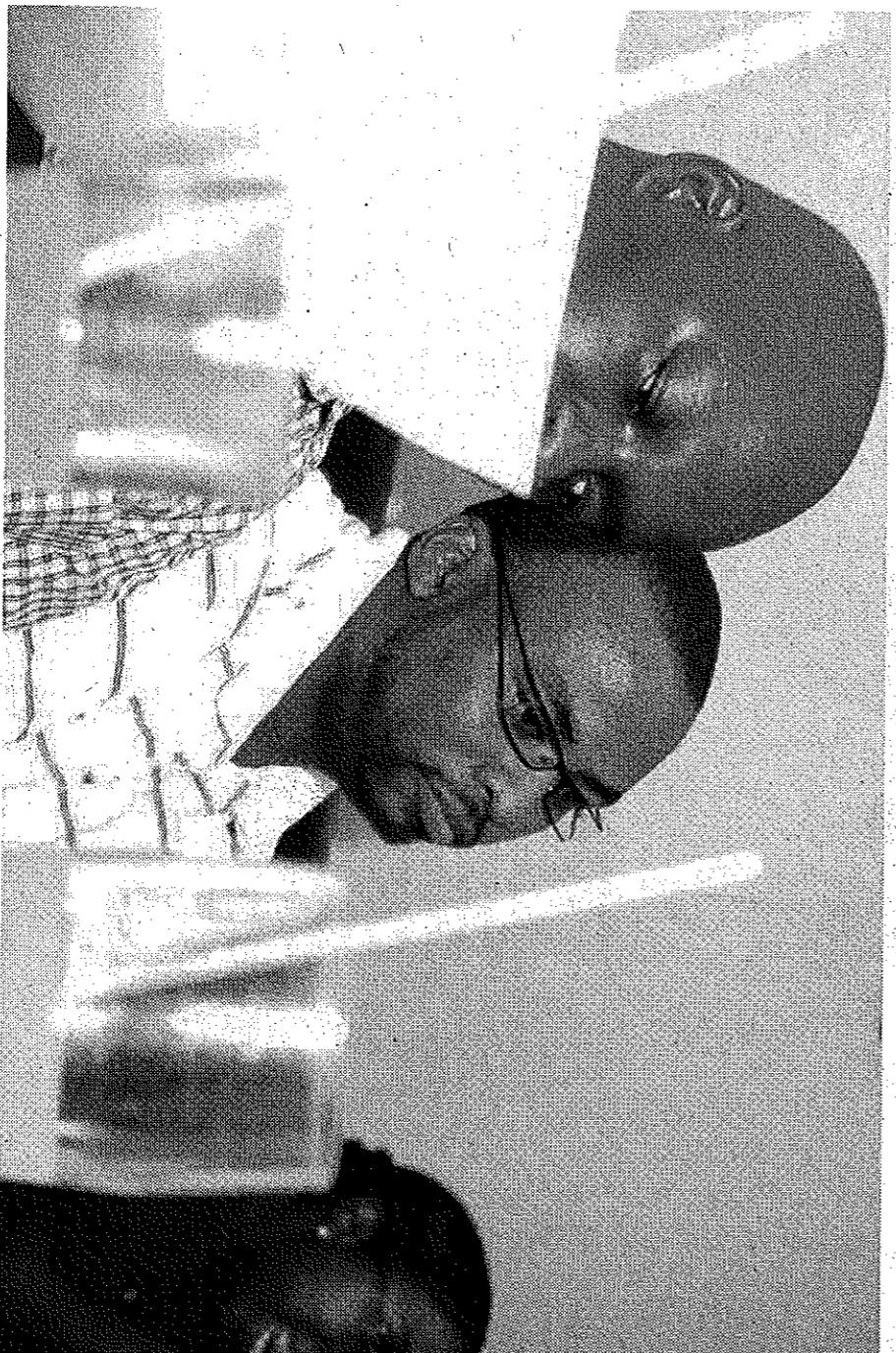
Cafes start with a short talk from the speaker, who is usually a scientist or a writer on science to introduce the topic.

After this there is usually a short break to allow glasses/cups to be refilled and conversations to start, followed by an hour or so of questions and answers and general discussion.

Cost

Cafes are generally free for the audience and venue costs are usually met by the organiser at least for the initial period.

We received training on setting up the science café and have come a long way since the first science café last year in April where we had Professor Onnu Anzala, Kenya Aids Vaccine Initiative talk about the intricacies of the search for HIV vaccine. We hope the initiative will change the perception that science is a subject for intellectuals and academics only, in addition to bringing science to ordinary people," she concludes.



Participants at the forum enjoy snacks as they engage in discussions