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PlaNet Finance invited students, researchers and practitioners to discuss “Impact and Social Performance of Microfinance”

The workshop „University Meets Microfinance @ Leibniz Universität Hannover“ on June 17th and 18th gathered around 80 interested students from 20 universities in Europe, microfinance practitioners and researchers. Among the speakers were experts from the GTZ, Oikocredit, Planet Rating, PlaNet Finance and CERISE, who presented Social Performance frameworks and measurement tools; William Pariente, a professor researching at the MIT Poverty Lab, who shared theory and application of Impact Measurement methodologies; and PhD- and Master students from different European universities who presented their research approaches to the subject. The workshop was organized by PlaNet Finance and the Institute for Money and International Finance of the Leibniz Universität Hannover and supported by the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, the European Union and Ernst & Young. *All workshop presentations are available at www.universitymeetsmicrofinance.eu*

The subject of this summer's Microfinance Dialogues Workshop “Measuring the Impact and Social Performance of Microfinance” is a topic which is today fervently discussed not only by microfinance practitioners but also in the general public. As microfinance has grown in scope and scale, critical voices are increasingly on the rise. On the one hand, skeptics question the impact of access to financial services on income, wealth and well-being; others project that with the increasing emphasis on financial performances, Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) might drift from their original social mission. Researchers and practitioners meet the criticism by developing new impact evaluation methodologies and implementing management approaches which focus on maintaining a balance between financial and social performances.

To enhance the exchange of theory and praxis and to deepen the understanding of the subject, PlaNet Finance invited practitioners and academics to present and discuss their approaches within the frame of the University Meets Microfinance (UMM) programme. During two days, practitioners shared specific social performance approaches and client assessment methodologies and academics presented their research studies analyzing the impact and social performances of MFIs in different settings. Field studies referred to Ecuador, Mexico, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Egypt and Uzbekistan.

“Dialogue and exchange between the academia and microfinance practitioners are of utmost importance as both parties can learn from and complement each other. At the moment, we however face a big gap of understanding for the work of the other”, explained Alexandra Steiner, a Master student from the University of Bergamo. Before doing her Master, Alexandra has worked for an MFI of the Aga Khan

Network in Egypt. Therefore she understands both perspectives. “The workshop enabled a dialogue between practitioners and academics crucially needed for the future development of the sector. I met so many interesting people from different backgrounds. These two days were very enriching. “

Robin Gravesteijn from Oikocredit noticed: “I felt the audience had a very good level of expertise and knowledge bringing together a variety of perspectives including development studies, economics, anthropology and other social sciences.”

“It was great!”, another student added, “When you are working on these theoretic methodologies all day, you sometimes loose track on what is actually going on in the field. This workshop really helped me to get back on track. I am full with new ideas for my thesis.”

The programme “University Meets Microfinance” was initiated in 2009 by PlaNet Finance and the Freie Universität Berlin and is co-financed by the European Union. By organizing seminars and workshops at European universities, offering scholarships and promoting publications, the programme aims to support and promote students researching on Microfinance; to foster the exchange and collaboration between academics and practitioners; and to raise public awareness on current microfinance related issues. So far more than 800 students, practitioners and professors from 15 universities have participated in the programme. It is carried out with the support of Ernst & Young Wirtschaftsprüfungsgesellschaft GmbH, ESCEM, Sogeti, Capgemini Italia and Sanofi-Aventis. Partner universities are Freie Universität Berlin, Sciences Po Paris, University of Bergamo, Université Libre de Bruxelles and ESC Dijon / Burgundy School of Business. You can find details about the programme on www.universitymeetsmicrofinance.eu

The next University Meets Microfinance - Workshop will take place at the University of Bergamo on October 22nd 2010. It will deal with a rather new development in the microfinance sector: “Microfinance Plus”, the idea of linking microfinance to social development programmes, especially in health, education and environment.

About PlaNet Finance

PlaNet Finance is an international NGO dedicated to tackling poverty through developing microfinance as a means of enabling financially-excluded and poverty-stricken groups to access financial services. PlaNet Finance and its international network are active in almost 80 countries. www.planetfinancegroup.org

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