

# The Role of Media in the Climate Change Debate in Developing Countries

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Climate change continues to be one of the most important global issues confronting the international community. Yet in developing countries, climate change is poorly covered by local media, and consequently the general public lacks understanding of both the science and the policy implications of climate change. Rural communities, which are particularly vulnerable, are often the least informed.

Why does the issue of climate change receive such cursory and superficial treatment by local media in developing countries when it is precisely those countries that are likely to be impacted most acutely? How can the media in the developing world become more active in educating the public about climate change and helping to shape public policy? These are not rhetorical questions. This article proposes some practical ways to increase public understanding of the issues, and stresses the key role the media should play in this process.

In developing countries, most journalists are generalists, and have little training in science or the environment – particularly specialist areas such as climate change. Hence, many journalists are uncomfortable covering climate change and its related issues. While many journalists and editors may be interested in learning more about climate change, training is expensive, and most media organisations either lack the funds or are otherwise unwilling to fund their journalists in attending specialised courses. One solution could be that governments and private media organisations forge partnerships in order to jointly fund the training of

journalists and editors. Most developing countries have allocated funds to raise public awareness about their national climate change strategies. Thus, governments could pay media organisations, out of this budget allocation, to publish or broadcast user-friendly, climate change-related articles and stories as documentaries, public service announcements or infomercials. Another option could be for donors and development partners that are supporting climate change programmes in developing countries to reallocate some budget lines to public awareness campaigns. Scientists and policy makers could also work with local editors, local actors and artists to disseminate climate change articles and information using grass-roots approaches.

Both the science of climate change and the policy options for addressing it remain under scrutiny. Climate change ‘sceptics’ have questioned the validity of climate science and projections, and the activities and strategies of a number of such sceptics have contributed to confusion around the policy debate. Monbiot (2007) suggests that this confusion has made it difficult for journalists and editors to report with any confidence about how climate change will impact their communities. In Istanbul, in May 2011, some permanent missions to the United Nations, together with South-South News, organised a side event meeting at the Fourth UN Least Developed Countries Conference on Climate Change and Media.<sup>1</sup> Editors and managing editors were among those who attended, and one of the conclusions reached was that climate change information should be humanised. A video documentary – ‘Climate Change and Public

Awareness,' presented by Ms. Catherine Namugala, the former Zambian Minister for Tourism, Environment, and Natural Resources – provided an example of this approach by capturing the views and concerns of Zambian farmers and other rural people. The people interviewed in the documentary attested that the climate had changed, and that this change had affected crop production and contributed to deforestation. The central message of the documentary was the importance of disseminating local climate change knowledge as part of various ongoing climate change and public awareness campaigns. Despite the diverse challenges faced by the media, Shanahan (2007) feels that it can do much to improve its telling of climate change stories. Improvements will, in turn, reduce the marginalisation of the large proportion of Africa's population that remains illiterate.

Even if the climate change debate could be simplified, a large proportion of rural populations in developing countries, especially those in Africa, are not able to read or write, even in their local languages. One measure that could overcome this impediment to mass communication would be to use a vernacular radio service. Studies indicate that radio broadcasts are effective in reaching local communities with targeted messages. The use of dramas, talk shows, stories, and other media tools can play a critical role in public awareness campaigns. Dramas, for instance, have proven effective and popular in conveying messages about HIV/AIDS. An interesting example is the drama 'Zimbabwe Braves,' which has contributed to encouraging preparedness, quick response and adaptation to natural disasters in Mozambique.<sup>2</sup> Stories are a way of sharing and discussing issues related to climate change, especially in primary and secondary schools. According to the Indian Climate Change Network (IYCN) (2010), women from the Nainital District of Uttarakhand in India, through sharing stories of changing water availability, disappearing forests, and other environmental challenges, have inspired their communities to take action against the impacts of climate change. The UK Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2006) concluded that trusted informants are better-believed and more likely to change people's attitudes to climate change.

A further UN-sponsored meeting has revealed a primary cause of the limited coverage of climate change issues in local and national media is audiences' and editors' basic lack of interest. During a seminar organised to launch a project on climate change and public awareness in Nairobi, Kenya, in late 2010, editors indicated that they felt their audiences were not particularly interested in climate change. More than 150 journalists attended this seminar over two days.<sup>3</sup> Kenya has a reputation for having a reasonably objective print media, and daily coverage of events is usually quite comprehensive. We thought that all of Kenya's major daily papers would cover the workshop, especially as it was a regional event with considerable relevance. However, daily papers did not cover the second and final day at all. Nairobians attending suggested a strong local rumour as the reason: the papers had not been paid for coverage! They said that getting stories into these papers was reputed to be an expensive exercise. Whatever the validity of such assertions it is true that editors prefer news stories, especially those with a personal element. Climate change issues are important and relevant enough to justify publication: they must be told in engaging fashion.

A number of governments in developing countries are engaged in awareness-raising among their populations. Taking action to minimise the damaging effects of climate change is the responsibility of many stakeholders: governments, scientists, media organisations, development partners, and indeed the general public. Given the power of modern-day media, it is essential that media outlets are encouraged and empowered to tell personal stories about the effects of climate change.<sup>4</sup> The media's support in educating the public about climate change will ensure that those who are most vulnerable to its impacts – notably the rural poor – fully understand the effects on their lives and their futures, which will in turn help to sow the seeds of grass-roots action.

#### *Notes*

1. The final report of the 'Istanbul Side Event on Climate Change and Media' for the Fourth UN Least Developed Countries Conference in May 2011 concluded that the media should be engaged

in helping to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change on developing countries and outlined the role that educating the public could play in that effort.

2. This is a radio drama series that was introduced by the International Organization of Migration (IOM) in 2009 in Mozambique to help people better prepare for natural disasters that frequently hit the country. This programme has been quite successful.

3. The project is funded by the Government of Japan and is being implemented by the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS).

4. The final report of the 'Istanbul Side Event on Climate Change' noted that media reporting on climate change should give a voice to the poor who are the most affected by environmental degradation. The side event also concluded that personalising climate change is an important way to help people understand this critical environmental issue.

#### *References*

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