

NEWS FEATURE:

Blind spot

Through modern media, Africa is now in people's living rooms and offices, so Africans need to report their experience of climate change.

Elisabeth Jeffries

It is known as the food basket of Ghana, a country usually considered peaceful. But Bawku, an area in the north, was the scene of killings for several years. Conflict between two groups, the Kusasis and Mamprusis, is the centre of the problem. Local observers estimate that fighting between the two led to thousands of deaths, while politicians blame poverty.

But Evelyn Tagbo, contributing editor at Nigeria's *Economic & Financial Times*, has probed a bit below the surface. "Climate change is the trigger," she says. Agriculture in this generally fertile area, which exports cassava, soya beans and other crops to the rest of the country, has been changing. "Droughts and floods are increasing. More and more people are becoming idle and can't continue with their farming businesses. So they migrate to Accra, the capital," she explains. Others got involved in the local conflict.

Most Ghanaians might not make this connection. Like most people, Africans are bound to wonder about the weather, but they do not know much about the global climate change that affects it because climate change hardly figures in African coverage. As a BBC World Service Trust report¹ has noted: "African citizens are least responsible for climate change and will be among the most affected; yet [...] they are poorly informed about the issue." Concerned by this gap, the United Nations took the lead and produced a guide for African reporters this year to raise awareness across media outlets in Africa³.

Major players include, for instance, South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*, the Kenya Broadcasting Company, *The Daily Nation* in Kenya, *The Daily Monitor* in Uganda and *The Ghanaian Times*. Internet access across the continent is rising, while radio is a dominant source in rural areas. Among many recommendations, the guide encourages broader reporting, more coverage of African adaptation plans, roles and responsibilities under the UN climate change convention, and more human experiences.

Of course, plenty of English language news is related to African climate change. But the connection between the two is not communicated to the audience. There are two reasons for this. Many activities and events in Africa are linked to climate change impacts or causes. They include farming, deforestation, housing, commodities business, gas flaring, corporate ownership and perhaps certain conflicts such as the Bawku crisis. Like China and India, developing countries in Africa, such as Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya, are creating environmental plans and renewable energy policies alongside fossil fuel development.

Most of these issues are at the fingertips of anyone with access to the Internet, television or radio. But Tagbo found² in 2010 that less than 1 per cent of a sample of African press reports discussed climate change itself and reflected it in their headlines. She doubts there has been much improvement: "From my own perspective and experience, it would have changed since then but not very significant change," she says. Climate change reportage in Africa, as in many parts of the world, is compartmentalized.

Local politics dominates coverage in many African countries. "The media here tends to place so much premium on government business, and is polarized between the different political entities, so all other matters suffer. There is a strong dose of coverage of corruption, and everything is along party lines", explains Kwame Karikari of the University of Ghana's School of Communication Studies. There are other reasons for the lack of interest, not least media freedom, which in many countries is restricted. "State control of media means there is no independent decision-making or coverage of areas of social concern."

As a result, many specific adaptation projects for climate change, or problems caused by it, are absent from local coverage, and this is the second reason why people do not hear much about it. Jonathan Diederiks, director of knowledge fields development at

the Southern Africa Science Service Centre for Climate Change and Adaptive Land Management (SASSCAL), draws attention to serious air pollution in South Africa. This, he says, is harming people in informal settlements (shanty towns with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants) but is not covered.

"People have no electricity so they need coal fires and paraffin for cooking and warmth. But the gases are highly noxious and they don't ventilate. It's more of a health than a climate change issue but it's very relevant," he says. There are few reports on these living conditions, however, so no action is taken. "It has major impacts on the urban poor but it's accepted as par for the course. How do we make measures to try and deal with it?" he asks.

Diederiks suggests that cook stove projects initiated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and development organizations, and relatively well-publicized worldwide, are insufficient in number. "There is so much good technology and so much money put in by agencies to address this. But within the local authorities, people need to take ownership and implement it on a larger scale. There isn't that understanding or knowledge that something could be done, and it's not seen as part of the broader development pathway but as donors having money to throw around," he says. As a result, projects are not fully implemented. When funding ends, they often come to a halt.

Some of the coverage is typical of many press and broadcasting outlets across the world. Diederiks says projects get reported in the *Mail & Guardian* as a feel-good story, but never reach the local housing policy departments. "You need to get these types of article into [national business newspaper] *Business Day*, not in an environment segment but in a contemporary economy section," he says. Demand for new equipment in the form of energy-saving lamps and efficient cook stoves is high because of the major influx of people into the settlements. "Green options are not just an environmental thing but a developmental imperative," says Diederiks.

Sometimes, local projects are concealed because of inadequate resources or infrastructure. Rosalia Omungo, an environment reporter at the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, believes that independent solar power projects have started up in the arid north of the country. They may not be run by development agencies but by the local communities themselves. But at the moment they are outside her scope.

“We need to work closer with NGOs in the deeper areas so we get to those stories. Not much has been told about impact and adaptation,” she says. Instead, coverage focuses on political concerns or alarming conservation problems such as elephant poaching. “There is little coverage of what’s going on in specific communities,” explains Omungo.

Given the explosion of communication channels just as international climate policies emerged, it is remarkable that so little is disclosed about the African environment. The World Wide Web is available at the click of a keyboard, allowing many people across the planet direct access to African websites. Skype allows direct, free conversations with individuals, while for many households international phone rates have become cheaper. Africa is in people’s living rooms and offices.

The opportunities to raise awareness in Africa are available through at least three avenues. Editors and reporters at international newspapers and broadcasters can easily fish out local news and conduct interviews either on the spot or using telecommunications. National and local media in Africa, who also watch the international news scene, can reveal new stories and campaigns to the wider world. Organizations with websites, such as NGOs, can draw attention to relevant issues and post them on social networks.

But although major broadcasters and newspapers enjoy significant power to stimulate action, international reporting has declined. An investigation by the UK Media Standards Trust⁴ observed a 39% fall in the number of international news stories across four UK newspapers between 1979 and 2009. Over the same period, the number of foreign correspondents working for the *Daily Telegraph* fell from 20 to 6. The diversification of channels has obscured and complicated the route map, so that whole chunks of information about important events or interesting local developments do not find an outlet. Some editors of major news brands have also become more cautious.

“There is less coverage of developing countries due to the extreme competition

for audiences. As the media proliferates, there is a loss of audience share because there are more and more players. That does not give editors the confidence to take risks with audiences,” comments Paddy Coulter, a specialist in media and development at consultancy Oxford Global Media. Coulter argues broadcasters and major newspapers still hold the lion’s share of communication control. But that could be shifting as audiences age.

A 2013 international study from the Reuters Institute for Journalism⁵ finds, for example, that the under-45 age group uses the Internet as its main as well as most frequently accessed source of news. For the over-45s, the main source remains television, with other traditional platforms also important. A related study⁶ states that people aged under 35 use social networks as their main way of finding news. Those in the older age group predominantly navigate to news through other routes, such as search engines or branded news sites.

Nevertheless, there are limits to what readers can absorb. The task is still, therefore, to capture attention using narrow funnels. “Most of us have a few websites we go onto regularly that reflect people we know and mix with. We could follow an African grassroots blogger, but most people don’t. So it’s hard for them to shout above the noise,” explains Mark Galloway, director of media and education charity the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT).

Meanwhile, there are good examples of improved broadcast coverage of climate change in developed economies. A 2013 investigation by IBT⁷ finds, for instance, that climate change coverage is migrating from the green slot to different types of television programmes, such as travel and nature. These documentaries demonstrate the continuing influence of the choices made by leading editors. No matter how empowered ordinary individuals are to network online, there will always be a need for editors with eyes above the crowd to select and synthesize news.

In the meantime, African media employers and educational institutions need to run more training programmes on climate change. “We need more international partnerships to build capacity in this area,” remarks Evelyn Tagbo. At the same time, improved telecommunications and satellite intelligence has provided plenty of opportunities for better local networking to enrich knowledge. For example, media development organization Internews, headquartered in the United States, has created a local horizontal news platform in South America called InfoAmazonia which it plans to translate to Africa.

Fresh reports from a range of publishers about the Amazonian forest are superimposed onto a real-time map of the region, so that users in the various Amazonian countries can keep up to date with what is going on. The objective of allowing an international comparison between stories and data is to improve public perception of concerns in the Amazon region. Similar networks have emerged covering forests across the globe, such as the World Resource Institute’s Global Forest Watch Project.

Internews’ free African service will be called Infocongo, but there will be some minor differences due to lower Internet infrastructure, speeds and bandwidth. “We will develop both the ICT platform side and the network of journalists behind it at the same time, identifying local partners and providing training, grants and networking to create a foundation of new local institutions,” explains Willie Shubert, senior programme coordinator at Internews. Unlike some of the other regions in which Internews works, there will be more dependence on mobile phones. That means the service will provide more basic data via mobile phones where necessary.

“The philosophy behind it is that the issue of deforestation is global and is subject to millions of international pressures. It is bigger than the individual reporter’s story but can only be understood through other stories, so they can use this network,” says Shubert. Internews’ project challenges a commonplace belief that local news is only of interest locally. Across the world, people are dealing with similar problems, so lateral initiatives such as this can help to raise reporting standards and provide unexpected international news stories. Meanwhile, if African nations continue to develop, new environmental policies will surely drive more widespread reporting. □

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