

RISE AFRICA

Inspiring Action for Sustainable Cities

Discussion Series

Using media to communicate climate change to local communities

By Carine Buma and Diana Njeru

*A case of Kenyan community
radio stations*



THEME:

Understanding our climate
reality with inspiration
from African wisdom and
adapting cities to climate
change



This thought piece documents an interview conducted by Carine Buma, a Professional Officer at ICLEI Africa, with Diana Njeru, a Project Director at BBC Media Action. Diana works with local radio stations in East Africa, building their capacity to produce climate change programs for rural communities whose livelihoods are highly dependent on the weather such as farmers, fishermen and pastoralists. The interview touches on the value of media and storytelling to reach diverse audiences and the importance of understanding your audience so as to contextualize climate change in a way that builds resilience.

One of your main thematic areas is climate change and how communities can adapt to the impacts of climate change. Why is this a special interest for you?

Despite the fact that Africa only contributes to about 3.6% of global carbon emissions, poor people on the continent are at the forefront of the climate crisis. From mudslides in Sierra Leone, cyclones like Idai in Mozambique and Zambia, prolonged drought and higher temperatures in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa, poor communities are not equipped to cope. Too many people have already lost their lives and livelihoods, had their homes swept away, and crops destroyed. Anomalies such as the desert locust invasion in early 2020 for example, was the worst in 70 years, destroyed many farmers' crops, resulting in food insecurity in some parts of East and Northern Africa.



Figure 1: 8 and a half month pregnant Esther fetches dirty water from a hole dug in a dry river bed which her daughter - who no longer goes to school - drinks.

Scientists predict that the world will be more than 1.5 degrees warmer by 2030, but in Turkana for example, home to some of the poorest people in Kenya, it is already 2 degrees warmer. It's only a matter of time before these areas become uninhabitable, but today, they are having severe impacts on people's health and livelihood. And our research revealed that it's women in these areas who are bearing the brunt of the impact of climate change, as they are responsible for providing food and finding water for their family and household. It is women who are forced to walk about 6 hours in the unforgiving heat to find water. It was no surprise then that we found that many women in the drylands of Northern Kenya suffer from chronic back pain, nose bleed when walking in such high temperatures and some pregnant women have lost their babies. Young girls are being pulled out of school to help their mothers with household chores. This will result in a generation of girls growing up without an education, after decades of successful interventions empowering the girl child.

Tell me about your experience working with community radio stations to communicate, educate and share knowledge around climate change, its impacts and ways in which communities can adapt to changing weather patterns.

We begin most of our projects by conducting formative research to help us understand the information needs of our target audiences and their media consumption patterns and preferences, which then informs the programmes we will help our local radio partner stations produce. In our climate change projects, our radio partners' audiences are predominantly farmers, fishermen and pastoralists, and their families whose livelihoods are dependent on the weather and who are worst hit by extreme weather events such as prolonged drought, poor rainfall, flash floods, etc. A large portion of these audiences are extremely vulnerable as they are poor, and live in remote rural areas with little access to information and climate services. Most of these communities do not have access to the internet, smartphones or televisions, and instead rely on radio stations to provide them with the information they need.

We partner with radio stations that already have the trust of their communities, given that they broadcast their programmes in local languages, providing information that is relevant to their contexts. Our aim is to build the capacity of these radio stations to produce quality programming that meets the information needs of their audiences. We do this by providing remote and on-the-job training to journalists working at these radio stations, many of whom have not had the benefit of formal training but have a deep passion for journalism. We provide our radio partners with radio equipment (such as recorders, microphones, mixers, laptops, etc.) to boost their broadcast capacity. We also hold training workshops and foster relationships between journalists and scientists/technical experts (in the agricultural, livestock and farming sectors) to encourage co-production so as to ensure that the weather and climate information being provided is accurate, timely and can be used by audiences to make practical and sometimes lifesaving decisions. Fishermen, for example, live day-to-day and need daily forecasts on the strength of the winds so that they can decide whether or not to go out fishing that day or how they should secure their boats. Farmers on the other hand need seasonal forecasts so that

they are able to plan what and when to plant. When seasonal forecasts predict low rainfall, farmers are advised and encouraged by agricultural experts, who are invited into the studio to plant more drought resistant crops.

Radio can quickly reach people at scale, including those living in regions that are hard for even humanitarian organizations to reach with aid. Radio can help empower individuals to take action and encourage communities to work together, increasing their adaptive capacity.

Your approach of contextualizing climate change impacts and customizing information and knowledge is really important given climate change can be a very theoretical or high-level concept that many don't understand or haven't even heard of. What is the role of grounded communication, local knowledge and local language in sharing climate change information, and why is it important?

Our formative research revealed that our target audiences don't rely on scientific forecasting because they don't understand it and therefore don't trust it. They tend to rely on more traditional methods of weather forecasting, using their own indigenous knowledge, observations or even relying on traditional weather forecasters. They do, however, acknowledge that traditional methods of weather forecasting are not as reliable as they used to be, as weather patterns have changed.



Figure 2: BBC Media Action's Senior Broadcast Mentor David Njuguna (green shirt) provides on the job mentoring in interview skills to Elias from Radio Kwizera at Lake Victoria in Tanzania

So, they are now caught between ceding reliance on traditional methods of forecasting in favour of the scientific predictions, which they don't understand and feel are often not relevant to their context. They want information that is easy to understand, and relevant to their specific areas so that they can use it to make decisions.

A daily weather forecast of the temperature in degrees and probability of precipitation for example, is not as relevant to pastoralist communities as it might be to someone living in the city. Pastoralists need to know where they can find water, or what they can do to cope with longer droughts. Our radio partners therefore provide a platform for livestock experts to encourage pastoralists to either sell some of their livestock during the drought at market price or diversify their livelihoods by practising agriculture or bee keeping. With the recorders and microphones we provide to our partner radio stations, journalists are now able to go into these communities, and record questions for local experts to answer in studio in local languages; capture the challenges they experience to help drive demand for climate services and document success stories to encourage other listeners to adopt practices that are already proven to help them adapt to climate change.



Figure 3: Pastoralists in Northern Kenya trek across the desert in search of water for their livestock.

From a broader perspective, what would you say is the role of the different ways of communicating and aspect of language in communicating key issues like those of climate change? You also mentioned media preferences and using storytelling, for example in producing dramas to communicate how to approach this. Could you elaborate more on this, as well as how this would differ from a rural-urban perspective?

Different audiences have different media consumption patterns and preferences. Whereas you may find that people living in cities, particularly young people like to watch short videos on Tik Tok, the working class would probably get their weather information from an app or the short weather forecast at the end of a news program. Pastoralists living in the drylands with low literacy levels

trekking for days or even months prefer longer radio programmes (being the only kind of media they have access to and can understand) in their local language that discuss issues that affect their livelihoods and explain in detail what they can do if say, their animals happen to catch a disease. Repeating these programmes can also be beneficial for them.

Radio dramas are a useful format to incorporate storytelling that is grounded in the everyday lived experiences of rural target audiences, developing characters that they can relate to such as a local farmer living in a similar environment, experiencing similar challenges as other farmers listening to the programme, and passing on knowledge on how to successfully deal with those weather and climate related issues. Dramas are particularly useful when dealing with deeply rooted cultural beliefs or social norms. Pastoralists, for example, have a strong attachment to their livestock, and are therefore reluctant to sell any of them, even during a drought when they can't afford to provide them with water. They are also reluctant to practice agriculture. Stories in the form of dramas and testimonials of pastoralists who are now also practising agriculture and have improved their livelihoods can influence behaviour change.

Our research helps us understand how people go about their everyday lives which helps us tailor our media approaches to their consumption habits. Fishermen go fishing at night, beyond the broadcast radius of the radio station and are therefore not available to listen to the radio then. They need daily wind forecasts, preferably in the morning and late afternoon so that they can decide whether to go fishing.

From your engagement with community members, how do you think your work is benefiting them? Do you feel they have a better understanding of what climate change is, and what they can do to contribute to mitigating the impacts of climate change in their communities?

When we started working with local radio partners, there was no word for 'climate change' in most local languages, so we had to come up with ways in which we could explain what it is. We monitor how our audiences are responding to the radio programmes in order to ensure that the information we are providing them with is relevant to their context and is easily applicable such as growing drought resistant crops when rains are predicted to fail. At the end of our projects we evaluate them to understand the impact they have had on our target audiences and radio partners and have documented several success stories

Some farmers in Uganda have started harvesting water because they listened to the weather and climate radio programme broadcast by our radio partner Bukkede FM.

In Northern Kenya, we have a success story of a pastoralist named Sisae who sold 2 of his cows during the drought and started farming and bee keeping. He was featured by our radio partner in the region Sifa FM on their climate change programme as a success story, after which his business continued to grow, and he is now providing employment for people in his community. Other

farmers have also diversified their crops and started rearing goats, while some pastoralists began practising agriculture, growing cassava and water melons. A fisherman named Peter Kapelo in the Lake Turkana region talks about the benefits of the scientific weather forecasts provided by our radio partner Radio Maata over their own indigenous knowledge, describing the weather forecasts as a light that illuminates their way.



Figure 4: Women in Marsabit, Northern Kenya walking in the desert to find water with 20 litre jerry cans. Photo: Frame Studios Production

In May 2021, one of our journalists Albert Mwanyasi from Sifa FM, who has been receiving training from our Broadcast Mentors, has attended climate change workshops and who we have supported in developing climate change radio programmes for farmers and pastoralists was named Radio Journalist of the year by the Media Council of Kenya for a story he produced under one of our projects on how drought is resulting in low birth weight babies in Northern Kenya.

These are very inspiring testimonies where lives have been saved, and productivity and livelihoods improved. Given your experience in working with local communities, and looking to the future, as we head into the Decade of Action for achieving SDG 2030, as well as the upcoming COP 27, what are the key things that you want policymakers, researchers, policy leaders, decision-makers and climate practitioners to know when talking about climate change action?

The poorest communities that are most affected by climate change do not think in terms of carbon emissions and global warming. To them, climate change manifests itself as poor access to water, food insecurity and even famine. They cannot reduce their carbon emissions as they barely have a significant combined carbon footprint. They only know that life is

getting harder and are desperately looking for ways to cope. Women are walking longer distances in higher temperatures to find water for their families. Pastoralists are losing their livestock in large numbers due to prolonged drought or flash floods. They are living in the future that climate practitioners are warning of, even though they are not the ones responsible for global warming.

In the run up to COP 26, we produced some short films on the lived experiences of those most affected by extreme weather events and least responsible for climate change that were targeted towards policy makers and leaders. Although some of us may be just a few feet away from clean water, in air-conditioned spaces and a short drive away from our local food store, there are those at the forefront of the climate crisis who live day to day, waking up and hoping that they will find food and water that day. And it is these people that policy makers and leaders should be thinking about as they set their targets. Some countries have committed to reducing their carbon emissions by 50% by 2030, and between now and then, those at the forefront of the climate crisis will have to bear the brunt of the impact of climate change, wake up every day and walk hours in increased temperatures in search of water for their families and livestock and deal with a myriad of life threatening health impacts. The question is, are leaders and policy makers coming up with solutions for their day to day challenges?

Further viewing

Diana Njeru's photography portfolio - <https://www.deepicted.com/>

The Long Walk to Water - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/our-work/climate-change-resilience/living-climate-change/kenya-maternal-health>

How radio helps East African farmers and fishermen to adapt to changing weather - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=oUyM0TI1jr0>

Peter Kapelo's story, fisherman - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zb40rd68Ayg>

Albert Mwadime – Radio journalist at Sifa FM, Northern Kenya - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htlSDrXBHtc>

The Flood that Took Everything - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/our-work/climate-change-resilience/living-climate-change/kenya-maternal-health>



About the author:

Diana Njeru
Project Director, BBC Media Action Kenya

Diana is a development professional with 10 years' experience managing projects that use media and communication to help reduce poverty, improve health, save lives and support people in understanding their rights. She is currently the Project Director at BBC Media Action, where she manages climate change projects that train local media to provide life-saving information to communities affected by environmental crisis.

Diana is also passionate about development photography and uses photography to communicate the human condition, bring attention to social injustice, promote cultural understanding and encourage positive change.

About RISE Africa:

RISE Africa is ICLEI Africa's platform for inspiring and fostering new connections that lead to swift and impactful actions for enhanced sustainability and resilience in Africa's urban areas. Exposure to forward-thinking ideas from different disciplines through a range of curated interactions will provide an antidote to outdated "silo" thinking that is well recognised to inhibit innovation. Instead of being another 'talk shop' amongst like-minded individuals, RISE Africa will bring a diversity of city role players together in innovative sessions to identify new opportunities for collaborative action.