

Media Coverage of Climate Change for Development

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Abstract

Climate change is a term that has become vogue as the world advances due to technological and industrial revolution witnessed the world over in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is used to describe the alteration (especially negatively) of the environment which in turn impacts on the state of human health and existence. This alteration, mostly, comes from the wastes resulting from unchecked industrial advancement. In Kenya, like in many other developing countries, climate change is threatening to adversely affect economic growth in the country and thus endanger Kenya's vision of becoming a prosperous country with a high quality of life for all its citizens. However, in most instances, it seems Kenyans treat climate change as an isolated problem from the broader environmental changes. An appropriate response to climate change in Kenya is only possible if communication and information provision is made central to any mitigation plans. Increased public understanding of climate change will enable citizens and communities to discuss the issue, adapt to the effects of climate change, and make informed long-term choices about their future. This paper discusses the role of the Kenyan media in promoting mitigation efforts in climate change in the country as a way of reducing the adverse economic effects caused by climate change. The paper is based on a critical review of literature on the media coverage of issues of climate change among other authoritative works done by other scholars in the area. Generally, African citizens' response to climate change is hampered by - among other more urgent concerns such as poverty, disease and ignorance - a fundamental shortage of relevant, useful information for African audiences. Unlike their industrialised counterparts, most developing countries, Kenya included, lack intensive media coverage and public awareness campaigns on challenges of climate change and the mitigation efforts. Climate change demands both political and personal responses in all parts of the world, and effective decision-making at both scales will depend on timely, accurate information dissemination. Therefore, the main thesis of this paper is that if media covers issues of climate change effectively, it will create awareness on issues on climate change and ultimately affect the adaptation and mitigation strategies in the country. This paper contributes useful insight on the role of mass media in overcoming the negative effects of climate change on sustainable development in Kenya.

Keywords: *climate change, media coverage, mitigation*

Introduction

Climate variability and change are important factors for societal development. They affect every facet of living things on the globe. The past few decades have been marked by issues of climate change as the world is faced with various challenges. According to BBC World Service (2010), Climate change is one of the most discussed global issues, second only to corruption. Impacts of climate change are projected to be many and varied, ranging from changes in ecosystems to impacts on human systems such as water resources to potential forced human migrations to widespread acidification of the oceans to insurance and reinsurance difficulties (ONeill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Overall, the country is expected to be warmer and experience a large degree of rainfall variability with extreme weather events such as severe droughts and floods, which will have far reaching impacts on climate sensitive sectors such as agriculture and tourism that underpin the country's economy (RoK, n.d).

Climate change causes the deterioration of the environment which we live in. Tihagale (2004) ascribes environmental deterioration to two main reasons. The first is the depletion of essential resources because of a need to maintain present-day lifestyles and the deterioration in as well as the destruction of the natural processes which are aimed at sustaining life on earth, whilst the second is the lack of awareness among populations, especially those that reside in rural or undeveloped countries, where due to a need to survive, they engage in

activities that cause and exacerbate environmental problems such as deforestation, soil erosion, pollution and veld fires.

The conservation of the environment can only be achieved if residents are more aware of the environmental issues affecting them and the mitigation strategies of handling them. This can only be done through effective communication strategies. MEMR (2012) further argues that climate change is one of the most serious challenges to socioeconomic development whose management requires the active participation of all members of the society both individually and as organised groups.

Methods

This paper is based on a review of current literature on media communication of climate change in Kenya and its effects on the mitigation efforts.

Impacts of climate change

Impacts of climate change in the world are both local and global. Africa is predicted to have greater impacts than other world regions, because of higher vulnerability and lower adaptive capacity. Impacts could threaten past development gains and constrain future economic progress.

Kenya is highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change, particularly its main economic sectors (Norrington-Davies & Thornton, 2011). The Stockholm Environment Unit (SEI) estimates that the costs of climate change in the country could be equivalent to a loss of almost 3% of GDP by 2030, impacting negatively on long-term growth (Stockholm Environmental Institute, 2009). According to this report, periodic floods and droughts (extremes) cause major macro-economic costs and reductions in economic growth; Costs include potential threats to coastal zones (sea-level rise), health burdens, energy demand, infrastructure, water resources, agriculture and loss of ecosystem services (Stockholm Environmental Institute, 2009). Rising temperatures and the extreme events they drive, such as droughts and floods, appear more likely to threaten crops and livestock across the continent. Climate change can have less direct effect too, by affecting the pollinators, pests, weeds and parasites. Together, these changes have already been linked to rising food prices, reduced food security, and increased malnutrition — three trends that show little signs of slowing (Shanahan, 2009). These impacts highlight the importance of early preparation in dealing with climate change.

Brock (2011) lists climate change as one of the contributors of insecurity; the other three are Increasing competition over resources, Global militarisation, and Marginalisation across much of the 'majority world'. It is estimated that the direct costs of climate change damage in Kenya will potentially amount to between one and two billion US Dollars annually by the year 2030 and considerably greater if indirect costs are included (GOK, 2010). Temperature change affects plant growth, thus climate change can impact the economy and thousands of people associated with agriculture in Kenya.

Kenya's economy is dependent on rain-fed agriculture, livestock keeping, hydro-energy general on, transport, tourism, and other climate dependent sectors. This means that if not handled efficiently climate change will hamper development in Kenya.

Mitigation and Adaptation efforts

Adaptation is defined by IPCC as an adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities (FAO, 2008). FAO goes further to state some of the adaptation strategies that can be implemented in any country. They argue that;

The most effective adaptation approaches in developing countries, as highlighted in UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meetings, are those that address a combination of environmental stresses and factors. Strategies, policies and programmes that are most likely to succeed need to link with coordinated efforts aimed at alleviating poverty, enhancing food security and water availability, combating land degradation and soil erosion, reducing loss of biological diversity and ecosystem services as well as improving adaptive capacity and improving the food production chain within the framework of sustainable development. Where possible, adaptation strategies should address social inequalities, such as differences in land tenure and lack of access to resources such as credit, education and decision-making that affects people's ability to adapt. The Millennium Development Goals are a necessary backdrop to integrating adaptation into development policy (FAO, 2008, p.4).

Mitigation of climate change is a human intervention aimed at reducing the sources or enhancing the sinks of greenhouse gases (IPCC 2007). Mitigation can be achieved by reducing energy use, for instance through changing travel behaviour, by improving energy efficiency, increasing the use of renewable energy, carbon offsetting strategies, sustainable destination planning and management, tour operators' choice of destinations and packaging of travel products, as well as other changes in business practices (Simpson, Gössling, Scott, Hall, and Gladin, 2008).

Early adaptation across the sectors has potentially very large benefits in reducing present and future damages. However, while adaptation reduces damages, it does not remove them entirely. Residual impacts in Kenya, particularly for some regions and groups are expected and need to be managed.

Mitigation and adaptation of climate change can be embraced by the public if they are aware of them. An understanding of these strategies will help the public make informed choices in relation to climate change. Thus, the strategies will not be efficient if they are not communicated effectively to those who should be embracing them.

Media coverage of climate change issues

The media have a crucial responsibility as a source of information and opinions about science and technology for citizens (Carvalho, 2007). Prof. Judi Wakhungu, Cabinet Secretary in the Ministry of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, during the opening of the African Conference on Media and Climate Change argued that the role of the media is critical in the control of climate change as it not only raises its public awareness, its causes, consequences and possible remedies but also investigates and reports incidences of its devastation (Ministry of Environment, Water and Natural Resources, 2014). This is in agreement with the argument put forth by Mrs. Habiba Mejri-cheikh, the Director of Information and Communication at the African Union Commission who highlighted the role journalist leaders can play in the African continent in educating and informing the African citizens about the threats of climate change (African Union, 2011).

The mass media is seen as an important source of information for the public about climate change, influencing public perceptions and understanding of the issues as well as government initiatives (Doulton & Brown 2009). The news media, as a key space for the production, reproduction and transformation of meanings, play an important role in this process, influencing both social representations and policy-making on issue of climate change (Carvalho,

2010). However, the intensive media coverage and public awareness campaigns prevalent in much of the industrialised world have been largely absent in Africa, particularly outside major urban centres (BBC World Service, 2010a). The media has a role of informing citizens of what is happening. The information role of the mass media means that they should inform citizens on the effect of climate change and how it affects the not only the economy of the country but also the health of each individual citizen.

Although there is no clear framework of reporting on climate issues in Kenya, various journalists and media houses have come up with an organization to promote the coverage of scientific issues including the environment. Media for Environment, Science, Health and Agriculture (MESH) was officially launched in November 2005 to support science reporters covering agriculture, the environment, health and development issues. Their aim is to encourage networking, training, meetings and workshops among reporters in Kenya. Among its broad objectives is to enhance awareness on environmental, agricultural and sustainable development issues through simple and easy to understand stories and messages. Despite their appealing objectives and aims, it is evident that most main stream media have not actively taken part in the organization. This is evident in its membership as well as the leadership of the mentorship programme.

Challenges of media coverage of climate change

According Tairo (n.d) most journalist and other media professionals are not well informed of climate change impacts. Some cannot differentiate between climate change and climate degradation. He further argues that poor coordination between African governments and the media are the reason why media fails to campaign for climate change. Other issues he highlights include; little or no donor contribution to campaign for environmental protection in Africa; poor resources in the media houses-lack of resources including equipment and lack of funds to cover travel costs.

Moggi and Tessier (2001, p.19) point out some current challenges of the media in Kenya which include: Kenyan journalists' access to public information from any kind of institution--hospitals, courts, the public administration, etc. is extremely difficult; the role of the community media are not yet understood or permitted in Kenya; the collaboration between journalists and "experts" still has to be promoted as essential for a solid and deep information for the public; the media practitioners need for up-grading in new technologies; and the status and position of the correspondents.

A study by Obonyo (n.d) found out that although Kenyan newspapers carry articles on the effects of climate change on the Kenyan society there are hardly any educational articles on climate change being featured. He argues that Kenyan journalism highlights recurrent local themes often with the local angle that fail to frame the stories against the wider backdrop of climate change or their long-term effect. In some other instances, reporters give inappropriate information or misrepresent facts in their reporting. Bell (1994), found out that 80% of stories on climate change reporting in NewZeland were no worse than slightly inaccurate; one story out of six contained significant misreporting. Carvalho (2007) on the other hand argues that media coverage of climate issues has changed over time to incorporate political issues into its analysis. Politicization of climate change message hampers its reporting and leads to misrepresentation and misreporting.

Journalistic norms of objectivity, neutrality impartiality and balance have in some other instances affected the reporting of climate change messages.

Boykoff and Boykoff (2007) argue that consistent adherence to interacting journalistic norms has contributed to impediments in the coverage of anthropogenic climate change science. In reporting news, (especially in developing countries) journalists emphasize balance and fairness, however, climate change is not just an issue with two sides, which should be given equal attention (Entman, 1993, p.51 cited in Ukonu, Akpan, & Anorue, 2013). This limits the space for reporting facts and thus leads to misreporting.

The mass media has in some other instances been accused of being accomplices in stoking climate change scepticism. According to Ukonu, Akpan, and Anorue (2013), many media firms worldwide have adopted definite patterns of reporting climate change especially in a way to defend the interests of their governments, countries and even carbon-based industries. Ukonu, Akpan, and Anorue, (2013) further argues that the major aims of most media have been: to subjectively determine images of climate change to portray in the media to influence public understanding/knowledge as well as government policies on climate change; to ensure that they protect their country's interests in the global discourses on climate change in areas such as solutions to climate change, aid/ funding, emission cuts vs. economic considerations, climate change adaptation; and submissions to make during climate change talks/conferences. In some occasions, the media frame climate change as uncertain, complex, difficult to tackle and requiring solutions that will severely affect world economy (Ukonu, Akpan, and Anorue, 2013, p.7). This framing affects the perception of the general public on issues of climate change. The tone set by the media influence what issues the public will focus on and with what emphasis or perception.

In most instances journalist report stories based on human interest and controversy to attract attention from its audiences. According to Aghan (2011) science stories have to compete for space and airtime against others from the world of business, art, music, sports, politics, education, conflicts, crime and accidents. To ensure that a story goes on air, one has to be innovative and creative. This makes it hard to cover environmental stories which tend to be factual and thus at times less interesting. On the other hand, some reporters don't put the stories in their right contexts. Reporting events or news propagated by various political leaders without questioning their credibility or consistencies in line with environmental policies affect its value. Thus using straight news blurs the journalist vision of detecting evident contradictions.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The media have a crucial responsibility as a source of information and opinions about climate change for citizens. Public perception and attitudes with regard to those domains are significantly influenced by representations of scientific knowledge conveyed by the press and other mass means of communication. The Kenyan media is currently reporting on climate change issues; however it needs to scale up its coverage massively if it is the challenges of climate change are to be fully communicated to citizens. Climate change is an issue which needs the attention of all participants and in the country to ensure that the mitigation and adaptation strategies are successful. The journalist should carefully evaluate their sources of environmental messages before reporting them; they should prefer use of non-news reporting. In terms of media framing, the media should use consistent frames and constructions in communicating the climate change message thus ensure clarity in their communication. MESHAs should be further equipped and supported by all media houses and thus ensure that environmental issues are well articulated in their media houses.

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