

Why the media matters in a warming world: A guide for policymakers in the global South

KEY MESSAGES

- The media is an important channel for information that can empower people to effect positive change. It can inform vulnerable communities of impacts and how they can adapt to them, and can promote mitigation activities that limit the amount of warming the Earth experiences.
- High-quality media coverage of climate change can deliver better-informed publics and better-informed policymakers — and more effective policymaking.
- Better media coverage can also raise global awareness of the challenges developing nations face, and promote a sustainable outcome to the intergovernmental climate change negotiations.
- But in many developing countries, journalists struggle to report effectively on climate change due to a lack of training, unsupportive editors and weak outreach from domestic policymakers.
- Policymakers can address these challenges by building media capacity, improving communication and engaging marginalised communities.

Climate change journalism can protect people and promote sustainable development — but only if it is accurate, timely and relevant. Strengthening the media's capacity to cover climate change can help countries to plan and implement domestic policies that work on the ground, while also meeting their international obligations. Policymakers have a huge role to play: by improving the media's access to locally relevant policy information; supporting journalists to report from rural areas and international meetings; engaging the media in policy and planning processes; and working to improve their own media literacy and ability to communicate clearly on climate change.

GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

The fight against climate change could be won or lost on the pages of newspapers, in TV and radio broadcasts and on the internet and mobile phones. This is because people need good information to make effective decisions — at the household or global level — and most people get their information about climate change from the media. Journalists can warn of extreme climatic events, explain complex policies, highlight coping strategies that work on the ground, act as watchdogs that protect the public interest, and promote the necessary actions from consumers, businesses and governments to build green economies.

The good news is that across the global South, climate change journalists are growing in number and experience. They are creating networks to help each other as they report on climate change, and progressive media outlets are acting to improve their coverage. In 2009, for example, representatives of nearly 1,000 broadcasters endorsed the Paris Declaration on Broadcast Media and Climate Change, pledging to increase their coverage of climate change and give greater voice to marginalised populations. Media coverage of climate change can make a difference. In Costa Rica, for example, a major series of journalists' reports in 2007 helped prompt the government to develop its National Strategy for Climate Change¹, including a pledge to be carbon neutral by 2021.

The bad news is that media coverage of climate change still occupies only a small proportion of total media reporting relative to the scale of the problem, which threatens the lives and livelihoods of billions of people. Public awareness of climate change may be rising worldwide but in many countries, public understanding of climate change, its causes and consequences, remains low. From a survey of ten African countries, the BBC World Service Trust² found that: "Local opinion leaders best placed to support community-based adaptation and to help communities respond to climate change are among the least informed about it." This is a barrier to effective action and to acceptance of necessary policies, but it is also a barrier to effective policymaking.

In many countries there are problems with not only the quantity but also the quality of climate change journalism. Climate change is often restricted to specialist environment pages or

“Good communication is ... the lubricant that helps the whole engine of climate response to turn and keep running”

programmes. It is often reported on inaccurately and presented as international news, without relevance to local people. Vernacular languages are especially poorly served. The causes of these deficits are varied (see Barriers to break, bridges to build). But policymakers who must grapple with the challenge of climate change can take concrete steps to tackle them. In particular, they can increase the knowledge, skills and resources available to journalists, as well as their own media literacy and ability to communicate clearly on climate change.

BETTER JOURNALISM: A FORM OF ADAPTATION

The media can provide vital information at times of emergency — from warning of imminent floods to explaining how to deal with disease outbreaks — but such disaster reporting often means too little, too late. Governments can do more to protect people,

infrastructure and businesses from the impacts of climate change if they involve journalists in their national adaptation plans. Indeed, strategic actions that improve climate change journalism can themselves be forms of adaptation because accurate, timely and relevant information is a critical component of resilience.

But many government initiatives fail precisely because they do not invest in effective communication as a priority, and many policymakers still see the media only as a ‘public outreach’ channel for promoting their own messages. Forty-five of the world’s least developed countries have developed a National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) that outlines their strategy for coping with predicted climate change. Yet a search through these documents reveals that nearly half (20) make no mention of ‘journalist’, ‘journalism’ or ‘media’. The other countries did mention these terms but often only as part of a vague statement about ‘using’ the media to raise public awareness, rather than a concrete plan. This betrays a weak understanding of how the media works. Journalists need *stories* that will appeal to their audiences and *news* to report in a timely fashion — not just information to publish.

Only 11 of the countries stated that they had consulted journalists while preparing their NAPA and only five mentioned plans to increase journalists’ ability to report on climate change. One country that has involved journalists deeply is Bangladesh. Its national consultation workshop for the NAPA was actually organised by an association of environment journalists. Bangladesh has since developed a more detailed Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan⁶ with a specific programme to strengthen the media’s capacity to promote adaptation and low-carbon development. Crucially, it recognises that journalists are not there just to amplify government views, but also to promote public debate and act as watchdogs.

BETTER COVERAGE, BETTER RESPONSES

Strong journalism can enable citizens, the private sector and decision makers to collaborate in designing effective adaptation and mitigation strategies. It can result in not only better-informed publics but also better-informed policymakers. But for this to happen, coverage must be rooted in reality — making stories locally relevant, and inclusive of otherwise marginalised voices.

Yet recent studies of climate change coverage in China⁷, Ghana⁸, India⁹, Malawi⁹, Nigeria⁴, Peru¹⁰, South Africa^{4,11} and Zimbabwe¹¹ suggest that this is not often happening. Instead, the international politics of climate change tend to dominate over coverage with more direct implications for people’s lives. Media reports tend to focus on differences in risk and responsibility between developed and developing nations, but make little mention of how responsibility, risk and ability to adapt vary within countries. Coverage also tends to

BARRIERS TO BREAK, BRIDGES TO BUILD

Surveys³ of journalists across the global South reveal that many face similar barriers to reporting on climate change: a lack of training, unsupportive editors, and limited access to information and interviewees including local scientists and officials. Many journalists want to report on climate change but struggle to convince their editors that such stories are worthwhile. This is due to a misconception that climate change is only about science or the environment, rather than about higher-profile, more popular topics such as politics and national security, people’s health and livelihoods, or business and the economy.

Many editors also see climate change as an international story. So they do not prioritise local reporting, instead using stories from Western news agencies or reprinting press releases without adding any local context or information. One study⁴ found that more than 70 per cent of articles on climate change in South Africa’s Mail and Guardian newspaper over six months in 2009 and 2010 were international with no South African (nor even African) content. Original, local stories accounted for just 6 per cent of the climate change coverage. But while climate change is indeed a global phenomenon, its impacts, and many of its solutions, will be local.

Even where there is a will to report local stories, journalists often struggle to access relevant information from domestic policymakers. In 2010, journalists in Namibia noted⁵ that the government ministries responsible for climate change were “insufficiently visible” and desperately needed to employ staff to build relationships with journalists, plan media strategies and act as spokespeople. A Colombian journalist echoed these views in 2011: “Never before was the Ministry of Environment as weak at communicating as it is now...it is impossible to get information from them about anything. Climate change seems non-existent for this institution.”

Policymakers can help break down the barriers to climate change reporting in ways that are cost-effective and bring co-benefits, not least in that they would increase their own understanding of climate change. Success will come not to those wanting to ‘use’ the media but to those that seek to know, understand and serve the media.



give little space to the voices of the poor or the role of traditional knowledge systems in providing solutions. These are the people on the frontlines of climate change — people who must overcome impacts such as droughts and floods and who have a wealth of information and knowledge to share on what works, where and how.

In Indonesia, media coverage of proposals to limit climate change by reducing carbon emissions from deforestation has, according to the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)¹², engaged all levels of society and has helped to move the policy debate forward. CIFOR concluded though that “opinions are evidently polarised and some voices are clearly louder than others” and that coverage had “raised expectations and created conflict over resource control”. One proven way to build the bridges between policymakers, journalists and local stakeholders that are needed to make media coverage of such complex topics locally relevant and locally representative is with learning groups (see Learning groups lead the way).

(MEDIATION OF GLOBAL CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

Media coverage also matters on the global stage, especially at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations. Journalists at these talks can provide audiences at home with relevant reports on the negotiations and what their governments are doing. But few media outlets from the global South invest in sending journalists to such meetings, so there is often minimal media presence there. This means that most of the news comes from Western media outlets, presenting the viewpoints of the more powerful nations and international nongovernmental organisations.

There has been some progress in recent years, as countries such as India and Nigeria have funded journalists to attend the UNFCCC meetings. The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme — an intergovernmental organisation — has also provided a journalistic reporting service for Pacific nations. And donor-supported projects such as the Climate Change Media Partnership also take journalists from across the global South to UNFCCC meetings.

Such efforts are helping reach millions of people but they really need to be greatly scaled up to reach the billions of people affected by climate change who have a stake in what happens on the global stage.

Similarly, developing nations could do more to take advantage of the large Western media contingent to communicate with electorates in industrialised countries. A notable exception is China. As its chief climate change negotiator, Xie Zhenhua, explained in 2010,¹⁴ in the past China would not communicate about its actions on climate change and this led some media outlets to distort its policies. China is now willing to be transparent says Xie: “Now we think: if we’ve done something, why not say so? What China has done, what it has not done, what difficulties it faces — I’m willing to tell anyone.”

If policymakers have a self-serving obligation to build bridges with the media, they also have an international obligation to do so. In December 2011, parties to the UNFCCC agreed — under Article 6 of the convention — to promote public access to information on climate change; and public participation in addressing climate change and developing adequate responses. To do this,

Millions of people across the global South got relevant news from recent UN summits because projects like the Climate Change Media Partnership brought developing country journalists there and because negotiators — from some countries — were willing to talk to them.

LEARNING GROUPS LEAD THE WAY

Michael Simire is one of Nigeria’s most experienced climate change journalists and was a member of his national delegation to the UNFCCC conference in 2010. Each week he sends his articles to a growing mailing list of government officials, journalists and business people who then discuss the article via email or call Simire to talk about the information he has reported.

More formal learning groups can bring even bigger benefits. In Uganda, the Forest Governance Learning Group (FGLG) has broken down barriers and built trust between journalists and policymakers. Before the FGLG engaged with the media, its members thought journalists were only interested in sensationalism, while the media characterised the forest sector as uniformly corrupt. By including journalists as members of the group, these negative perceptions were completely reversed. Journalist members now use outputs from FGLG studies and meetings as raw material to produce accurate and timely news items. An independent review¹³ stated that: “Armed with this accurate information, and more aware of the debates that surround the forest sector, the quality and focus of media reporting around forestry has improved massively.”

parties agreed to train ‘relevant personnel’. This should include not only government employees and scientists but also journalists, to enable them to interpret the complex mix of climate science and policy for their audiences.

NEXT STEPS

Climate change is the context in which all of our lives will be lived. Its scale and impacts over the coming decades will depend on the decisions we make in the next few years. Information will be critical. As Sri Lankan journalist Nalaka Gunawardene has said¹⁵: “Good communication is essential for the success of both climate mitigation and adaptation. It’s like the lubricant that helps the whole engine of climate response to turn and keep running.”

High-quality media coverage of climate change can inform vulnerable communities of potential impacts and how they can adapt to them, and can promote mitigation activities that limit the amount of warming the Earth experiences. Policymakers can and should do more to engage citizens through the media, to communicate with journalists and to support a better class of climate change journalism that is relevant to local audiences, builds public awareness of the issues and contributes to improved policymaking. In particular, policymakers in the global South can:

Build media capacity

- Support training workshops and fellowships for journalists, and environment courses in journalism schools.

- Enable journalists to travel to international meetings and to report from rural areas.
- Work with and support national networks of environment journalists to build the media’s capacity over the long term.
- Engage with senior editors to demonstrate that climate change is relevant to their audiences — and how they can include a climate change dimension in stories about politics, business and other issues.

Improve communication

- Develop strategies to engage with the media that include regular briefings on key policy processes.
- Employ trained press officers and spokespeople who are familiar with how the media works and what journalists need.
- Support learning groups that bring together policymakers, scientists, journalists, civil society organisations, business people and community representatives.

Engage marginalised communities

- Translate existing training materials — such as the Earth Journalism Toolkit¹⁶ — into local languages.
- Support systems that enable policymakers to hear and react to rural or otherwise marginalised communities — such as through community radio.

The all-encompassing nature of climate change means that these actions will bring additional benefits as nations strive to achieve sustainable development and meet the Millennium Development Goals.

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AUTHOR

Dr Mike Shanahan
International Institute for
Environment & Development
mike.shanahan@iied.org

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The Climate Change Media Partnership is a joint initiative between IIED, Internews and Panos to improve media coverage of climate change issues in developing countries. For more information see www.climatemediapartnership.org



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