

Original Paper

Challenges and Opportunities for Increasing Media Coverage of Climate Change in Kenya

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Abstract

Globally, media coverage of climate change has been disappointing in both advanced and developing countries, Kenya included. This article addresses the need to educate and train African journalists so that they can report adequately on climate change and in doing so, help not only to raise awareness of climate change but also to increase understanding of the multiple aspects of the phenomenon. Although Kenya has an elaborate governance structure in support of climate change, coordination across key ministries, departments and institutions at national and county levels has been wanting. Coverage of climate change by Kenya's main print media houses and television stations over the last decade (2010-2019) is investigated and found to be minimal. A survey of the opinions of the local media sets the parameters for a discussion of the current challenges faced in increasing media coverage of climate change. Lack of journalistic capacity, conflicting media priorities and inadequate funding to train and support journalists are major concerns. The paper concludes with a discussion on how media coverage could be improved to close the gaps in science journalism and, in particular, coverage of climate change in Kenya.

Keywords

climate change, media, funding, disasters, capacity, opportunities

1. Introduction

Given the continued threat of climate change, there is an urgent need to educate the general public about the issue. The media are perfectly positioned to do this and yet in many countries coverage of climate change is sparse, and globally, the problem of climate change persists. A BBC (2009) documentary entitled: *Least responsible, most affected, least informed*, suggested that African citizens are among the least informed about human-induced climate change, its causes and its consequences. Despite having a comprehensive set of policies around climate change in place, media coverage of issues related to climate change is scant in Kenya and the lack of awareness of climate change issues by the general populace in Kenya is typical of the BBC's African citizens.

This article addresses the need to educate and train African journalists so that they may report on climate change and in doing so, help not only to raise awareness of climate change but also to increase understanding of the multiple aspects of the phenomenon. A decade ago, Tagbo (2010) noted that media coverage of climate change is disproportionate to the level of threat that it poses to the African continent, Kenya included. Her observation is just as true today. This paper, therefore, considers the challenges associated with, and opportunities for, much better media coverage of climate change in Kenya.

2. Methodology

A literature review was carried out to develop an overview of general global trends in media coverage of climate change over the last few decades. The politics of climate change in Kenya was then reviewed with regard to the role of national ministries, legislation, NGOs and civil society. Having provided the political context in which the local media operates, a web-based survey was undertaken to determine the extent of climate change coverage by the print and television media in Kenya over the last decade (2010-2019). Guided by the literature and results of the online survey, a questionnaire was developed and used to gather the opinions of professionals working within the local print and television media regarding the challenges associated with increasing coverage of climate change. Their opinions inform the discussion of how media coverage could be improved in Kenya.

3. Results

3.1 Politics of Climate Change in Kenya

Kenya has extensive climate change governance structures, ranging from national policies, acts and ministries, to other government institutions, county governments, the private sector and civil society. The National Climate Change Framework Policy of 2016 was developed to provide guidelines on responding to climate variability and climate change and to support the National Climate Change Action Plan of 2013. It outlines the system of climate change governance through low carbon growth,

an enabling regulatory framework, efforts to enhance climate resilience and adaptive capacity, and the mainstreaming of climate change into planning processes. The National Policy is in line with Vision 2030, which is the Kenyan government's blueprint for development projects. It provides opportunities for low carbon development for both individuals and communities.

The Climate Change Act of 2016 also addresses the development, management, implementation and regulation of mechanisms to enhance low carbon development and climate change resilience for sustainable development in Kenya (KOEE, 2018). The ministry responsible for the coordination of climate change response in Kenya is the Ministry of Environment and Forestry. Numerous departments within the ministry have been established to deal with different aspects of climate change. The National Climate Change Secretariat has the mandate to develop policies, strategies and action plans. Other departments that also play a role in climate change response include the National Environment Management Authority, the Kenya Meteorological Department, the Mines and Geology Department, the Directorate of Environment and the Department of Resources, Surveys and Remote Sensing. The Ministry of Environment and Forestry is the national focal point for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (KOEE, 2018).

The National Environment Council, which is chaired by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, is responsible for policy formulation under the Environment Management and Coordination Act. This Act sets out provisions in such areas as climate change mitigation, adaptation and finance. In addition, the National Drought Management Authority, established in 2011, has as its role the supervision and coordination of drought management and climate change adaptation in the country (KOEE, 2018).

Other ministries which are responsible for aspects of climate change include the Ministry of Energy, which is mandated to produce clean, sustainable, affordable and secure energy while protecting the environment and addressing climate change. The Ministry of Agriculture implements various climate change programmes and projects, such as that on climate-smart agriculture, and the Ministry of Water and Irrigation has prioritized the streamlining of climate change adaptation in the water sector by implementing the 2030 National Water Master Plan.

Besides the ministries, other government institutions which have climate change units and focal points, including the Kenya Wildlife Services (KWS); the Kenya Forest Services (KFS); the Kenya Agricultural Livestock Research Organization (KALRO) and the Kenya Forestry Research Institute (KEFRI).

At the county level, the County Governments Act of 2012 requires each county government to develop a climate change adaptation plan within a framework that integrates economic, physical, social, environmental and spatial planning.

The private sector plays a big role in the delivery and design of many adaptation services in Kenya, such as weather observation technology and early-warning systems, the distribution of

drought-resistant seeds and other agricultural products, and water management infrastructure and technologies. The private sector also provides financial support for the above activities. Equally, civil society plays a role in monitoring and evaluating the progress of climate change projects, and in raising popular awareness of the need for concerted climate action (KOEE, 2018).

Clearly, the current Kenyan climate change governance structures are elaborate and extensive. Their impact on the ground, however, is minimal at best and the country is grappling with the negative impacts of climate change. A serious omission of the national climate change governance structures is that it does not incorporate the Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology which regulates the media sector.

One of the objectives of the National Climate Change Action Plan, as outlined in its preface signed by former President Kibaki, is to strengthen nationwide actions towards climate change adaptation and mitigation. President Kibaki emphasized that the National Climate Change Action Plan was people-centred, ensuring that climate change actions support Kenya's achievement of its development agenda (GOK, 2013). Sadly, the role of the media was not clearly spelled out in the national plan and it is doubtful whether the government will apply Section 9 of the national plan which focuses on knowledge management and capacity development and bring in the media to cover and disseminate climate change information to all segments of Kenyan society.

3.2 Global Trends in Media Coverage of Climate Change

The extent of media coverage of climate change differs from one nation to the next (Kansas University, 2019), but generally, coverage is poor, leading Thysen (2019) to lament that the media have essentially ignored the climate crisis for three decades. In the USA in October 2018, following the IPCC release of its landmark special report on the impacts of global warming, documenting the 1.5 per cent rise in global temperatures above pre-industrial levels, only 22 of the country's 50 biggest newspapers covered the report (Pope & Hartsgaard, 2019).

Kansas University (2019) argues further, that although rich countries have been covering climate change for over 30 years, they have not slowed the warming of climate. In fact, the Kansas University report states that if rich countries want to increase public awareness of climate change, the media need to address the phenomenon as a matter of urgency. By considering how the media have portrayed climate change, we can better understand how to improve their coverage of the issue, with the hope of giving it a priority status that is reflected in policy.

In a journalism workshop in Peru funded by USAID, it was observed that climate change continues to be perceived as a threat and bad news. Media coverage of flooding, retreating glaciers, droughts and failed crops presents a bleak and depressing scenario. The workshop concluded that by changing how the media report on climate change, this bad news could be given a positive spin. For example, addressing climate change could be seen as a chance to be prepared, to grow in a sustainable way, to

improve our crops, to promote group collaborations, and so on.

Although some editors fear that climate stories will not sell papers, Thysen (2019) observes encouraging signs that some media outlets are trying different approaches which may, in turn, deepen the understanding and engagement of targeted groups for a longer duration. For example, CDKN (2018) suggests that journalists should find human interest and development angles to convince editors and audiences that climate change really is a story about people's lives and well-being and about sustainable economies. Moreover, reporting on a recent workshop organized by the Earth Journalism Network and the Solutions Journalism Network on how media coverage of climate change could make a difference, Schonhardt and McCann (2019) recommend the following:

- Don't make people look like victims or heroes.
- Don't promote silver bullets or a one-size fits all solutions. There is no one solution or answer to the climate crisis.
- Don't avoid other factors. Natural disasters such as wildfires are caused by drought and rising temperatures but also development decisions and policies.
- Look at what's working.
- Don't overstate the role of climate change. Individual weather events are sometimes difficult to link to climate change.
- Start with a local example of action and then tie that into a broader trend or issue.
- Avoid activism by focusing on an approach.
- Connect stories to people or places. Look at impacts on food, health, gardening, travel (things people care about and are familiar with).
- Good practices (adaptive measures) have taken on new urgency; move the conversation forward.
- Tell diverse stories. Climate change will affect different communities in different ways, and similar communities may learn from one another.

UNESCO (2018) adds that through informed reporting, journalists can shine a light on the wealth of activities that people are undertaking to respond to climate change. At the local level, covering climate change can help to save lives, formulate plans, change policy and empower people to make informed choices. Writing about developing countries, Kakonge (2012) suggests that the way forward for journalists and editors is to humanize climate change messages and stories.

3.3 Media Coverage of Climate Change in Kenya

Kenya is among the countries which are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Recurring droughts and floods are frequent. Rainfall is unpredictable and current projections are that temperatures will rise by 2.5⁰C by 2050. Consequently, it might be expected that media coverage would be representative of the seriousness of the problem. Reporting in 2011, however, Kakonge found systemic apathy in the media with regard to covering climate change. To determine if this is still the case, a web-based survey

was conducted of the number of climate change articles published in three of the national newspapers and the number of programmes produced in three of the national television stations, between January 2010 and October 2019. The results of the surveys are presented below.

3.3.1 Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change

The Daily Nation and *The Standard* are the two largest national newspapers in Kenya. Founded in 1902, *The Standard* is the country's oldest newspaper, while *The Nation Group* was established by the Aga Khan over 60 years ago. *The Star* began circulation in July 2007 as the *Nairobi Star* and was rebranded as *The Star* in 2009. All three papers cover a wide range of topics, namely politics, governance, agriculture, county, regional and international news, business, entertainment, culture and sports.

The number of articles related to climate change carried by each newspaper over the last decade (January 2010-October 2019) is reflected in Figure 1. These figures are dependent on how well the online archives are structured. Data for *The Star* were only available for 2013-2019. Analysis of the data clearly demonstrates that, before 2018, there was scant coverage of climate change issues. Not one of three papers reported more than eight stories in an entire year, supporting an earlier observation that developing countries' editors and their audiences appear to lack interest in climate change (Kakonge, 2011). Between 2017 and 2018, climate change coverage increased fourfold in both *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, from 5 to 22, and 1 to 4, in the two papers respectively. *The Star*, which on average covered more stories annually than the other papers, also upped its coverage almost threefold, from 7 to 20 in the same period. This new reporting vigour has been carried through to 2019, with all papers having published significantly higher numbers of climate change stories than ever before. By October 2019, when the data for this study were collected, 106 articles had already been reported in the three papers.

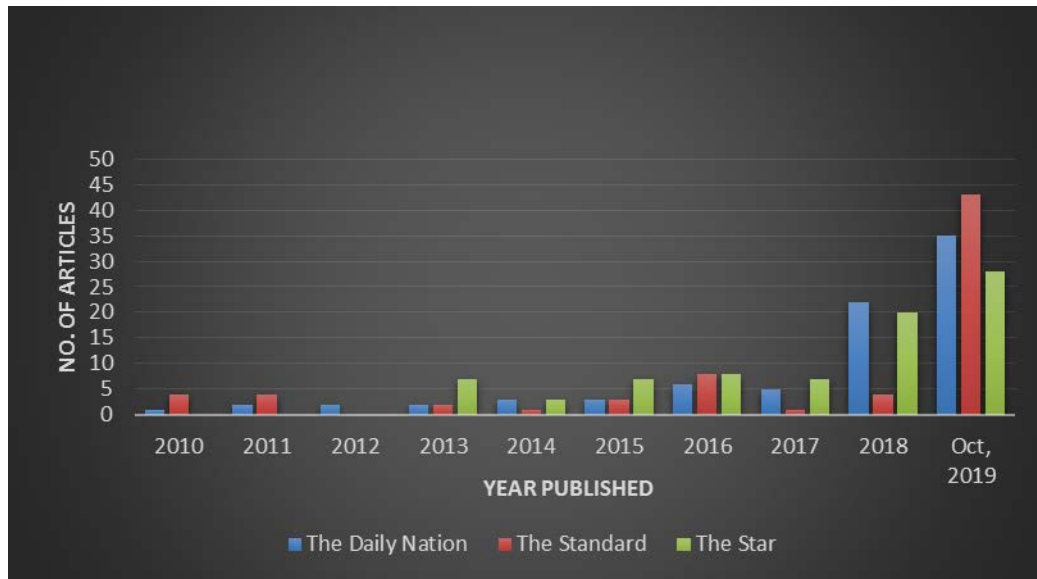


Figure 1. Local Printed Media Reporting on Climate Change by Three of Kenya's National Newspapers (2010-October 2019)

Note: Data for the Star were only available for 2013-2019.

The stories covered by the Kenyan print media tend to focus on politics, scandal, crime, sports, culture, with little interest shown, until very recently, in climate change-related activities. The reason for this is because the print papers and television channels are driven by a single objective: to make money, failing which they will go out of business. For the Kenyan papers to survive, they must cover stories which can sell. While coverage of climate change has increased substantially over the last one-and-a-half years, an examination of the content of the stories shows that, in most cases, they focused on the negative impacts of climate change at both national and county levels, namely floods, drought, malaria and hunger. Some of the stories also referred to global warming and greenhouse emissions. In addition to local news, *The Daily Nation* featured international stories covered by the UN and other agencies geared towards climate change. *The Star* featured both international and national stories on climate change and a few articles on drought within the country. *The Standard* also covered renewable energy. Clearly, most of the stories carried by the national papers referred to climate change in terms of disasters. The papers carried these stories because of their sensational impact and immediate relevance to readers, in particular, those living in areas that have been affected or who know someone from those areas.

3.3.2 Television Coverage of Climate Change

KTN (Kenya Television Network) is the oldest free-to-air privately owned network in Africa. It began its operations in 1990. *Citizen TV* was established by Royal Media Services in 1999 and relaunched in June 2006. It broadcasts mainly in English and Swahili. *National TV* was established by the *Nation*

Media Group in 1999. It was revamped as *NTV* in 2005 and is a general entertainment channel.

From a review of the online archives, it was possible to determine the number of television programmes that focused on climate change (see Figure 2). Again, it is important to bear in mind that these figures are dependent on the accuracy of the archives.

It is clear that very few television programmes have addressed climate change. In the review period, *The Citizen* only aired a total of six programmes, *NTV* eight and *KTN* nine. One positive sign is that, so far in 2019, the amount of coverage on two of the three networks has been greater than over the nine previous years combined.

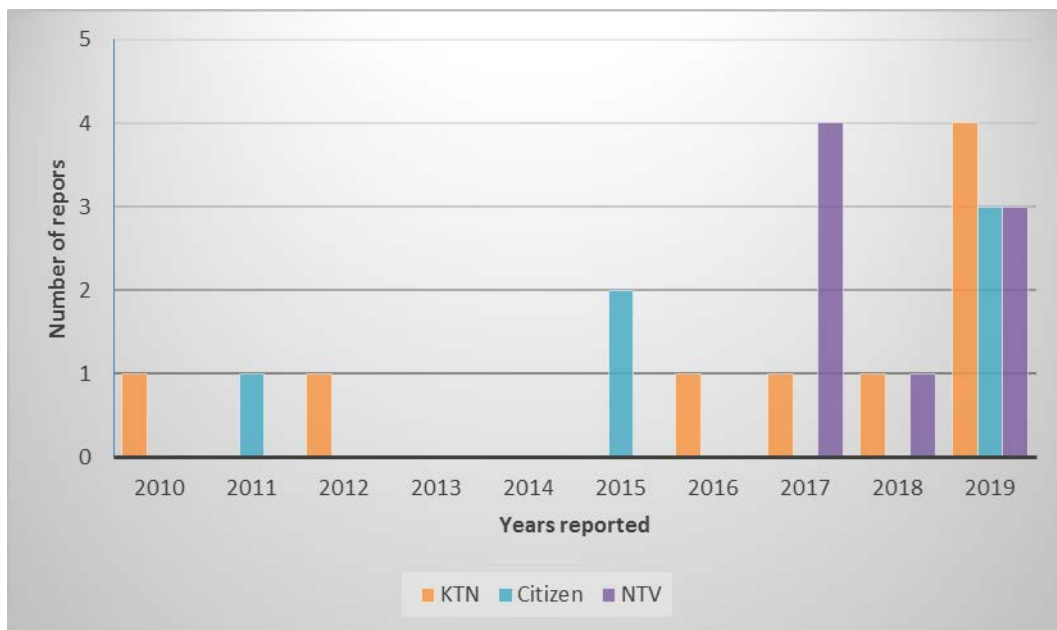


Figure 2. Local Television Reporting on Climate Change (2010-October 2019)

3.4 Challenges Facing the Kenyan Media with regards to Covering Climate Change

In light of the sparse reporting on climate change by the newspaper and television media, the next stage in this research exercise was to collect the opinions of people working in the media in Kenya in an attempt to understand the reasons for this disregard. Based on the literature, a questionnaire was developed and sent to journalists and editors working for various media organizations and also to freelance journalists. The questionnaire comprised open-ended questions on such issues as coverage of climate change by the main local papers; why papers only cover crises or disasters; challenges facing climate change journalists; the framing of climate change articles; the improvement of climate change coverage; and opportunities for media coverage of climate change. The 10 participants' views, which are based on their expertise and personal opinions, are integrated in the discussion that follows. Three

major themes emerged from their responses, namely: a lack of journalistic capacity, the focus of media priorities, and a lack of funding for science journalists.

3.4.1 Journalistic Capacity

Most of the literature acknowledges that the lack of coverage of climate change information is due to the limited capacity of journalists and editors. According to Corner (2011), quoting Catherine Mwesigwa, most journalists in newsrooms have arts backgrounds and have little understanding of the science of climate change. In fact, even Tagbo (2010) acknowledges that a lack of understanding of the issues surrounding climate change makes it difficult for most African journalists to do a good job of reporting it. This is a view supported by the organization KOEE (2018), which attributes the challenges facing climate change reporting to inadequate understanding by journalists of the complex nature of the subject.

The war to combat climate change cannot be won without a strong and credible media. Strengthening the capacity of journalists in Kenya and elsewhere is crucial and it must be a continuous exercise and not a short-term affair. According to one respondent:

“Kenyan journalists lack the requisite skills to cover issues not just of climate change, but many other environmental issues as well. I think we do not have specialists in this sector who can contribute great content on these issues. Most journalists want simple political stories that make no significance in society and are soon forgotten... besides those journalists who cover climate change in the country who do so out of sheer interest in this sector. But these are few and far between.”

Some studies, such as those of Corner (2011), KOEE (2018) and Tagbo (2010), suggest that efforts to build the capacity of journalists need to be carried out in collaboration with editors and media owners. This will ensure teamwork and support of the climate change stories being covered by journalists. However, while the media is an important source of information on climate change, many journalists find it difficult to get editors' buy-in for stories on climate change.

3.4.2 Media Priorities

Kenya is not alone when it comes to inadequate coverage of climate change by the media. Other analysts, such as Tagbo (2010), confirm that the media focus on politics, corruption, entertainment and business, because copy on those topics sells better and, in that way, they can command the lead in newspaper placements. In short, as the previous respondent noted, there is a tendency by the Kenyan media to concentrate only on political stories and scandals, hyping and sensationalizing mundane matters at the expense of serious journalism. Consequently, climate change only becomes a topical issue when there is an opportunity to write a sensational story.

3.4.3 Financial Constraints

One of the challenges identified by a number of studies, including Corner (2011) and KOEE (2018), is the cost of training both journalists and editors to cover and report about climate change issues

effectively. The training of journalists to cover climate change is not cheap and necessitates the support of many sponsors, governments, development partners, donors, media owners, and others (Kakonge, 2012). Unfortunately, this has not been the priority of the Kenyan government, media houses or donors. While a few development partners have supported training workshops for journalists in climate change, the impact has been minimal.

Given the continued threat of climate change, there is a need for aggressive fundraising, not only to train journalists and editors in the science of journalism but also to buy dedicated space with the local papers (*The Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, *The Star*) for climate change issues. For example, *The Daily Nation* has a dedicated space for innovative and smart agriculture, known as “*Seeds of Gold*”. Another example may be seen in *The Guardian* in the UK, which has a dedicated section for environmental issues and, by extension, climate change.

After the twenty-fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, known as COP 24, the Kenyan Government promised to issue sovereign green bonds, and establish the Climate Change Fund and Disaster Risk Finance Strategy. All these instruments are intended to cushion the economy from fiscal risks arising from the effects of climate-related shocks and natural disaster. In addition, in 2018, Garissa County launched its County Climate Change Fund and allocated the amount of 60 million Kenyan shillings (some 600,000 US dollars) to help in mitigating the harmful effects of climate change (Ngotho, 2019). Four other counties—Makueni, Wajir, Kitui and Isiolo—have also established County Climate Change Funds to identify, prioritize and finance investments to reduce climate risk and achieve adaptation priorities (IISD, 2018). These examples should be instructive to other counties. Moreover, during his address at COP 24, the Kenyan Minister of Environment, Keriako Tobiko, emphasized that lack of adequate funding has hindered implementation of the national climate change action plans of many developing countries, including Kenya (Mwangi, 2018). Of course, this has implications for funding programmes relating to the media and climate change.

IIED (2011) observed the extensive need for predictable and adequate funding to strengthen the media’s capacity to cover climate change issues. The availability of such funding would help countries like Kenya to plan and implement national programmes to increase public awareness and understanding of climate change issues, and these, in turn, would support the country in meeting its international obligations. Likewise, CDKN (2018) has emphasized that no matter whether the amounts concerned are small or targeted, funding can make all the difference in enabling journalists to get out and cover the climate change stories that otherwise would go unreported.

3.5 Opportunities and Best Practices for Covering Climate Change

It is not easy to report on climate change. Even when journalists have capacity, when there is buy-in from the media houses, and when funding is available, the complex nature of the subject and its

associated scientific terminology often make it difficult for the public to understand. CDKN (2018) observes, however, that communication from the IPCC and other scientific bodies has improved over recent years and many more press releases, headlines, documents and slides are available and accessible to ordinary people. The media has a crucial role to play in educating the public about climate change. The following paragraphs set out some ideas about how the media in Kenya can be supported to develop their capacity and coverage of climate change.

3.5.1 Government Support

Ideally, the elaborate Kenyan government framework on climate change should benefit journalists by giving them access to a broad spectrum of climate change issues. This review of the scant climate change coverage provided by the country's print and television media demonstrates, however, that communication with government structures is inadequate and, in some cases, altogether lacking. There is a need to revisit the national climate change governance structures in the country to ensure that there is better coordination among the ministries, institutions and organizations vested with climate change responsibilities. Proper coordination between climate change experts and journalists could enable better and routine coverage of climate change issues.

3.5.2 Increase Journalistic Capacity

Participants in the study were generally of the view that climate change is not covered by Kenya's main local newspapers and television stations because some journalists do not know how to articulate climate change issues. Other journalists pointed to the lack of sponsorship, which has limited research and investigative work concerning climate change. Further, participating editors also noted that local papers and television networks lack a dedicated desk for reporting science-based issues such as climate change. To improve the coverage of climate change in Kenya, journalists and editors must be trained on substantive issues, myths about climate change need to be challenged and corrected, and strong networks and relationship with experts need to be built to encourage routine sharing of climate change updates.

3.5.3 Provide Funding

The issue of funding is closely related to that of journalistic capacity. Lack of funding was one of the challenges cited by all journalists who responded to the questionnaire. All journalists and editors confirmed that media houses dedicate very little funding to climate change stories, which means that insufficient information is published or aired on these issues. The way forward, as President Kenyatta acknowledged, is for all stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental, to undertake and share responsibility for climate change initiatives. The study participants recommended that a national media fund with flexible bureaucracy should be established and be accessible to journalists who are interested in covering climate change stories and who want to attend climate change conferences.

3.5.4 Encourage Proactive Reporting

Globally, there is a tendency for the media to focus on crises or disasters that result from climate change. Feedback from participating local journalists and editors indicated that issues around climate change only receive limelight and publicity when catastrophic events like droughts or floods occur. While some participants argued that covering disasters provides them with an opportunity to inform and educate the public, others noted that coverage of these crises is directed primarily towards exposing the failures of either the national or county governments to respond to climate change. In addition, as noted by some journalists and editors, organizations will sometimes sponsor media houses to cover crises in order to acquire information. NGOs, for example, can use that information to solicit money from their sponsors.

Regardless of the motives, Kenyan media coverage of climate change tends to be reactive rather than proactive. Adopting a more informed, proactive approach, focusing on the human stories of people making a positive contribution to curbing climate change, through better agricultural practices, for example, could have a direct and benefic impact on the way people respond to climate change.

3.5.5 Sponsorship Support for Proactivism

As noted above, media sponsors tend to favour stories of disasters such as floods, droughts and famine. While sensationalism will always sell papers, a more informed public will also relate positively to stories of a more sustainable, proactive nature. If sponsors can be encouraged to support these stories, then coverage of climate change should improve. One idea worth exploring is the institution of awards for both journalists and media houses that give priority to and good coverage of climate change. Sponsors could also be encouraged to support these awards.

3.5.6 Target University Students

Finally, to grow a new generation of scientifically savvy reporters and journalists, science graduates should be encouraged to take postgraduate journalism and communication courses. These students should be financially supported and provided with mentors to hone their skills.

4. Conclusion

The media coverage of climate change in Kenya is very much like that in most developing countries. Although print media coverage has increased substantially over the last year and a half, television coverage remains minimal, and stories still tend to focus on natural disasters and other sensational events. Without strong political and financial support, the media will find it difficult to maintain their momentum and produce informative and engaging stories.

Climate change is a complex subject and journalists, reporters and editors working on climate change stories need to understand the science behind the subject. Journalists who are passionate about climate change and the environment should be encouraged and supported in efforts to deepen their

understanding and to develop their networks of specialists. Editors and media houses must enable more extensive and regular coverage of climate change, not only when disasters happen, but also to highlight stories that present proactive approaches to the issue. By engaging their readers and viewers with inspiring stories about such good practices, public empathy will be encouraged, and this, in turn, could result in changes in attitudes and more responsible behaviour.

The Kenyan government's climate change governance structures should be revised to reflect the current realities. In particular, the Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology need to make provision for and support extensive and informative media coverage of climate change. The government should devise innovative ways to support climate change coverage in print, television and radio media. National and county governments should establish climate change funds to cover the training of journalists and editors and also to enable them to travel to affected areas and provide comprehensive media coverage. Recent cases of established climate change funds in Garissa, Makeni, Isiolo, Wajir and Kitui counties are instructive in this regard. Implementation of the Climate Change Action Plan calls for a strong political will and commitment. Accordingly, allocating adequate funds from the government's budget will demonstrate national commitment, this commitment is essential before funds can be solicited from partners and donors.

Above all, as Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, affirmed in April 2016, upon signing the Paris Agreement on behalf of his country: "*Climate Change will test our intelligence, our compassion and our will. But we are equal to that challenge*". Echoing his sentiment, we marginalize the media at our peril. The media must be recognized as a critical partner in the war to combat climate change and be supported to develop informative, accurate and humanized coverage of the multiple aspects of climate change.

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