

Communicating climate change in Africa

According to a pan-African research report from the BBC World Service Trust and the British Council, many Africans blame themselves for the impacts of global climate change they are witnessing despite being least responsible for the causes.

Just as a lack of practical information and resources hindered attempts to combat the HIV and AIDS pandemic, now millions of people whose lives are directly impacted by climate change do not have access to relevant, appropriate information that helps them respond to challenges they face.

These are some of the findings of Africa Talks Climate, research conducted on the public understanding of climate change in Africa. Over 1,000 citizens took part in discussions across ten countries including Sudan, South Africa, Kenya and Ghana. The research found that people tend to cite local issues such as tree cutting and bush burning, rather than global emissions, as the greater cause of their changing climate.

Climate change, will of God

Some people, notably women and those from rural areas, also attribute changes in climate to the will of God. Many feel powerless in their struggle with changing weather patterns, and in an echo of a common early response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic, some attribute extreme weather as a form of divine punishment [God] punishes people because we do bad things... He shows his strength with the hurricanes and storms says a young Senegalese woman.

Among nearly 200 opinion leaders interviewed - from media and government representatives to religious and community leaders - many highlight the information gap and compare the challenges of communicating climate change to those of HIV and AIDS: "When it [the pandemic] started nobody wanted to believe it... before we knew it, it hit us left, right, and centre... And the same thing is going to happen with climate change," says Joyce Mhavi, MD ITV Tanzania.

Critical role for media

BBC World Service Trust executive director Caroline Nurse says the role of the media in strengthening information provision is crucial: "The initial global response to communicate effectively about the HIV and AIDS pandemic was slow and often inappropriate to local needs: the media have had a critical role in helping combat HIV and AIDS in Africa and must be supported to do so again in the case of climate change."

The key communication challenges highlighted by Africa Talks Climate are:

Immediate - Many Africans, particularly those in rural areas, are struggling in the face of increasingly unpredictable weather. They need greater information and resources.

Perceptions - People know their weather is changing, but do not connect it to global climate change.

Responsibility - Most Africans blame themselves for the impacts they are witnessing and some attribute them to the will of God.

Language - Climate change terminology is not easy to translate or understand. It provides little insight into the changes that most Africans are experiencing.

Information - African citizens need spaces to exchange ideas and information, foster understanding and plan for action.

Leadership - Local leaders are well-placed to communicate climate change and help their communities to respond, but are among the least informed about it.

Media - Many in the sector assert they lack knowledge of climate change and consider it too scientific and not an audience priority. Build capacity of the news and non-news media to communicate climate change in locally relevant ways.

Africa Talks Climate aims to support those charged with communicating on climate change - international organisations, governments, the media, NGOs or community leaders.

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