

A WISER way to communicate

To be truly useful, a climate service doesn't just provide forecasts. It also makes information available in a way that is easy to access and relevant to end users. The Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa (WISER) programme has been using a range of partners to help the weather information reach more users.

WISER's mission is to transform the quality, accessibility and use of weather and climate services at all levels of decision making for sustainable development in Africa. "The WISER programme is based on the demand for services," says Dave Britton, Head of International Development at the Met Office, "And user engagement was key to our planning, programme design and delivery."

Backed by an investment from the Department for International Development (DFID), the Met Office has brought together a range of international, national and regional partners to ensure sustainable and long-lasting change through the WISER programme.

Kenya proved the ideal country to develop a range of services, as a change in the constitution meant that climate services had been devolved to the 47 county councils across the country. Following an initial pilot project in the east of the country, also funded by DFID, WISER Western began working with nine of the County Directors of Meteorology to develop localised, accurate and regular forecasting. Yet creating the forecasts was only half the story.

"One main challenge was how to communicate the information to reach people in good time," explains Ayub Shaka, National Coordinator for WISER at the Kenya Meteorological Department (KMD). "Whether we were producing a seasonal, weekly or daily forecast, we had to work out how to communicate it most effectively to end users."

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Forecasts delivered to phones

During the project's initial stages, a comprehensive assessment brought together key livelihood groups from four counties in Kenya. The assessment showed that SMS messaging could be an extremely effective way of getting forecasts out to people on the ground, giving farmers and fishermen the information they needed to plan ahead with confidence. Yet the costs were prohibitive.

“It cost 50 dollars a county per month to disseminate to up to 1,000 intermediaries,” explains Robert Powell, Media Consultant for the Met Office. The Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture and KMD simply couldn't afford those costs on an on-going basis. But that's where non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were able to make a huge difference.

“The really successful examples were where organisations were using SMS messages to disseminate other information to rural stakeholders,” explains Robert. So for instance, if an organisation arranged microloans for equipment like pesticides and fertilisers, they would already be contacting farmers with SMS messages about loan repayments. Many were sending out agricultural advice tips with their messages, and so by including regular forecasts with their communications they could add value to their service.

WISER Western helped empower the NGOs involved by offering them a better service, paying for all the partners to operate a platform on Frontline SMS for six months. The most successful partnerships were with organisations including Anglican Development Services, Western Forestry and the Kenya National Association of Farmers' Federations (KENAFF). These bodies were already supporting farmers with communications and got right behind the SMS messaging to deliver on-going forecasts and climate information.

The messages reached impressive numbers of people. For instance, the county coordinator for KENAFF in Trans Nzoia county regularly sent out forecasts to 107 farmers by SMS and by email. Each of those farmers then shared it with groups of 50 to 70 people in turn. That has a huge impact on reach, as Robert explains: “On the basis of perhaps half the members of each group in the nine counties getting the forecast within the first 24 hours, then the forecasts were reaching about 100,000 farmers at a time.”

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The SMS messaging also acted as a barometer to measure success. To put it simply, no news was good news, as Ayub explains: “Every time the information was not issued on time, the officers who issued the information received telephone calls and messages [asking about the forecast]. So that indicated that people were picking it up.”

Robert agrees. “Dissemination through intermediaries was really important because we could check whether people had received a forecast, and what they were doing with it.” Broadcasting a forecast on radio just can’t give that full picture, as you have no real way of knowing who is listening and what they are doing with the information once they receive it.

The use of SMS messaging disseminated by NGOs could be a vital step forward in the Met Office’s remit to develop sustainable and long-lasting solutions that save lives and protect livelihoods across Africa. “The initiatives that will stick are the ones that can be shown to work,” explains Richard. “It’s about looking at what works and getting it adopted as standard practice everywhere.” Thanks to the support of NGOs, a network is now in place that could be reaching out to farmers and fishermen for years to come.

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