

Climate is on the menu

Weather and climate information provided by national meteorological services across East Africa can at times be technical and difficult for non-experts to understand. A working partnership across the region has come up with an ingenious solution: Climate Cafés.

In the Greater Horn of Africa, unpredictable climate can have a devastating effect on people's livelihoods. A delay to the rainy season can lead to crops withering in the ground, leaving farmers with no way to make a living. For fishermen dependent on Lake Victoria, a sudden storm can upturn boats and threaten lives as well as livelihoods.

Across the region, farmers and fishermen need timely information to make informed decisions about their businesses. Yet the answer isn't simply to make weather forecasts more easily available. Journalists must have the skills needed to understand and interpret the forecast information so they can present it to fishermen and others in a way that is both accurate and instantly understandable. To do this they need to know the right questions to ask the meteorologists in interviews. Not only that, the meteorologists need to have a clear idea of the information that is required and communicate it to the media without jargon.

To bridge the gap between journalists, meteorologists and people on the ground across East Africa, the Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa (WISER) programme has been working with the Network for Climate Journalists in the Greater Horn of Africa (NECJOGHA) to set up and run an innovative series of workgroups known as Climate Cafés.

"The cafés bring together several people from different walks of life," explains Patrick Luganda, Executive Director of NECJOGHA. "They then have the chance to discuss

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recent forecasts and draw on their experiences, so it gives some useful feedback to the meteorologists.”

The cafés are normally introduced by a representative from the national meteorological service. Presentations vary each time, but to take a recent example at a Climate Café in Mbarara, Uganda, scientists used the forum to highlight the weather products that were available, including daily forecasts, ten-day forecasts, known as dekadals, and seasonal forecasts.

Following the initial presentations, the cafés are then opened out to the floor for discussion. By coming along to the cafés, journalists can gain a deeper understanding of what people want from forecasts. “It’s not just the technical information, but the interpretation of what that means and making it relevant to different sectors,” explains Patrick. The cafés help to demystify meteorological terminology for journalists and people on the ground, while also giving scientists the chance to see how the media works and what journalists are looking for from them.

Sharing best practice

The Climate Cafés started in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania in 2016. Following the successful pilot phase, the aim is for the cafés to become regular across the eleven countries of the Greater Horn of Africa. “The Climate Cafes are about knowledge transfer, education, breaking down the science into simpler terminology. If we can spread the cafés out then local governments could pick them up and use them,” says Patrick.

Whenever a national meteorological service releases a seasonal forecast, NECJOGHA aims to call a Climate Café in the capital city of the country concerned. Another key aim is to take the cafes out into local regions, so they reach rural communities and end-users such as farmers and fishermen. There are logistical challenges, but the cafés are already reaching villagers and people living in more remote regions.

Cafés can also include updates on innovative solutions to the challenges posed by the harsh climate of the Greater Horn of Africa, including, for example, climate resilient farming techniques. For instance, during a café held at Mukono in Uganda in October 2018, participants were taken on a field visit around the Mukono Zonal Agricultural and Development Institute (MUZARDI). They were introduced to efficient

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ways of growing vegetables, such as food sacks and vegetable towers – ideal for urban areas where space is at a premium – as well as recent innovations in rearing cattle and aquaculture.

Making a difference

The cafés are making a tangible and lasting difference for people who are reliant on the land for their livelihoods. Farmers are making better informed decisions about the crops they are planting, for example. “If they need to plant maize or beans then they have to have rain early,” explains Patrick. They can also decide on the varieties that are planted, switching to faster growing varieties if the rains are predicted to be late. At the Climate Café in Mukono, Dr Beatrice Akello, the Director of MUZARDI, cited the recent rise in maize production, which was due to farmers receiving timely advice on the right seed to plant, along with accurate forecasting.

“With the right information, farmers can also stagger their planting,” adds Patrick. “For example, by planning their timeframes, they can ensure that certain crops that need a lot of moisture are planted first.”

Following the cafés, more and more journalists are reporting on the seasonal forecasts, in language that non-experts can understand, and focusing on the issues that farmers, fishermen and pastoralists need to know about.

It’s an exciting change for Patrick and his team. “The more that the media attends, the more relevant their reports are. The other thing is, that people are demanding climate information more or less daily, which is something we have never had before.” There have also been requests for product and sector specific Climate Cafés, such as one focused on growing coffee.

“This is a game changer,” says Patrick. “People didn’t relate economy directly to the climate and know how the two were linked, but they understand it now.”

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