

Making forecasts front page news

The mission of the Weather and Climate Information Services for Africa (WISER) programme is to enhance the quality and use of climate information services for sustainable development in Africa. One of its key aims is accessibility, making sure that local communities can access and understand forecasts. Which is why WISER’s work with journalists is such a key part of the programme’s success.

With unpredictable rainy seasons and the challenges posed by climate change, people living in East Africa need timely, accurate weather forecasting now more than ever. Yet the answer isn’t simply to make forecasts more easily available. Journalists have to be able to understand and interpret forecast information so that they can present it to people in a meaningful way to help them make decisions for the future.

One of the ways that WISER is encouraging journalists and meteorologists to work together is through the work of NECJOGHA (Network of Climate Journalists in the Greater Horn of Africa), which is being coordinated by BBC Media Action through the Weather Wise project. NECJOGHA has held regular workshops to bring together climate scientists and journalists to discuss climate information and how to get forecasts out to communities.

“The workshops have been instrumental in bringing together NECJOGHA members to work with scientists from the national meteorological services (NMSs),” explains Patrick Luganda, Executive Director of NECJOGHA. A 2019 workshop in Uganda was attended by scientists and media developers keen to understand how they could better generate, package and disseminate climate information. The learning went both ways. Climate scientists gave presentations on how meteorology works, while veteran journalists also explained key functions of the media and what makes a story newsworthy.

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NECJOGHA has also developed innovative, informal workshops known as Climate Cafés in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. The cafés bring together members of the media with various climate information end users, especially farmers, policy makers and local government representatives. By gaining a fuller understanding of how people use climate information and the data they need, journalists acquire better insights to help them shape their weather programming.

Understanding then transforming

By delivering the programmes and information that people want to hear, journalists can make a tremendous difference to the situation on the ground. As Patrick Luganda says, “National planners can make impactful decisions because of sufficient lead time of the information received.” Farmers also benefit from relevant, timely updates, as they can choose the type of crops to invest in – depending on expected rainfall amounts and the general trend of the seasonal forecast.

Recent events in the region show just what a difference that can make. At the project’s peak, East Africa was hit by an unusually heavy second rainy season that lasted from September to December 2019. Flooding led to the destruction of property throughout the region. Thanks to the NECJOGHA network, however, regular updates were disseminated across Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Real-time reporting was a game-changer, enabling people to make critical decisions such as where and when to travel. “The constant, persistent coverage with upcountry reports throughout the three countries participating was something never seen before,” enthuses Patrick Luganda.

Building bridges

Another example of how WISER has worked closely with journalists is the DARAJA partnership, coordinated by Resurgence, a social enterprise based in London, and including local implementation partners Kounkuey Design Initiative (KDI) in Nairobi and the Centre for Community Initiatives (CCI) in Dar es Salaam. Daraja is Swahili for ‘bridge’, and the project aims to bridge the gap between the national meteorological services (NMSs) in Kenya and Tanzania, and the people living in informal urban settlements – particularly in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam. These communities are extremely vulnerable, as the settlements are often located in challenging areas, such as next to rivers that flood after heavy rains.

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Before DARAJA, radio stations broadcasting to the Nairobi and Dar es Salaam settlements mainly reported on extreme weather forecasts that they received from the NMSs. While this was useful, the forecasts were not particularly localised and sometimes not even broadcast in the local language. Journalist Alex Kememwa who works for Pamoja FM in Nairobi said, “Our radio used to give only extreme impact weather forecast information which was almost always general and could not be narrowed down to the effect that would be of concern.”

DARAJA aimed to change this by bringing together residents from the communities, journalists from local radio stations and members of the weather scientific community, as well as non-governmental organisations such as the Red Cross. Through a series of workshops, the participants collaborated to create a shared understanding of the science behind forecasting and the needs of people using the forecasts.

The workshops led to two crucial guides that have changed weather reporting for informal settlements in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam. One guide is a reference tool for media and community partners, interpreting forecast terminology into simple, local language. The other explains the local terrain so that radio stations can develop more locally-focused messages.

Making weather social

The project has made a tangible difference for people living in both settlements, as Sunayana Sen, Project Manager at Resurgence, explains: “Our radio partners believe that the improved weather reporting and programming have increased the interest and understanding of the community, as they’re now more localised and focused on forecast-based preventive action.”

During the September to December 2019 rainy season, an elderly resident in Dar es Salaam found the rainfall forecasts invaluable. “In October, I got the information that it is going to rain, which helped me to relocate my husband who was very sick to our son in Manzese area. If it wasn’t for that information received about the rain, it would have been challenging for me to handle my husband in such rainfall conditions,” she explains.

In Nairobi, social media also became a useful tool for getting forecast information across. Consequently, radio journalists follow up programmes by posting weather information and advice in online forums such as Facebook and Twitter.

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DARAJA is hopeful that the inclusion of weather information in regular programming will continue after the project comes to an end, a sentiment echoed by the journalists. As Alex Kememwa says, “We now wish to own the programmes as such, so that even after the project our listeners will be used to getting the information and always be on the lookout.”

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