



Lessons learned

Researchers and journalists at a CCAA workshop in Mombasa
Photo: IDRC/M. O'Neill

Engaging African media on climate change and adaptation

The CCAA program from its inception has used a variety of tools and approaches to profile key events and projects to the media, including press releases, targeted pitches, development of media-friendly backgrounders, and the inclusion of journalists in program events. The program and its partners were highlighted in some 40 media reports in 2008–09. This year, we have put a greater emphasis on outreach at the regional level, and we are gradually gaining insights into what works and what does not in communicating about adaptation.

Media are an important link in research communication and cannot be overlooked in attempts to see research translated into policy or practice. Projects in Benin, Burkina Faso, Kenya, Madagascar, Morocco, Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania have used outreach to local media to make climate change and variability issues more accessible to decision-makers and local communities. Some CCAA partners have enjoyed a higher national profile and increased attention from policymakers partly from being in the media spotlight.

Lessons to date

- ▶ Media outreach demands relationship-building and mutual trust
- ▶ Journalists value credible information and access to research sites and events
- ▶ Providing local angles on international events and issues can be a compelling hook
- ▶ Researchers need to share their stories in ways that seem newsworthy.

In November 2008, CCAA program staff invited members of the West African press to a pre-COP 14 briefing in Dakar, Senegal. The UN Climate Change Conference in Poland (COP 14) provided an opening to capture the interest of regional journalists, and staff used the opportunity to seek advice on how to improve public information in the region and strengthen links with the media. Fifteen seasoned national and international journalists attended.



Journalists cover briefing on AfricaAdapt Photo: IDS

Participants made the following suggestions:

- ▶ Give journalists access to research projects and personnel in the field
- ▶ Actively share information on program news and progress, research in progress, current events, and activities related to climate change
- ▶ Offer reliable source material to improve the quality and quantity of news coverage on the issue
- ▶ Increase the visibility of the program and its activities
- ▶ Take a long-term approach to working with environmental journalists through their associations and thematic groupings to ensure a strong collaborative relationship.

Much of this good advice would apply anywhere in the world, but few media outlets in Africa have the resources to finance the research and travel needed for accurate and in-depth coverage on environmental issues. Journalists also cover a dizzying array of issues, making it difficult for them to report knowledgeably on technical issues. As a result, much science and environment news in Africa is culled from international

media sources. This means there is a strong appetite for local angles on these stories. Journalists are keen to pursue opportunities such as field visits to deepen their understanding and tell the stories of those at risk from climate change.

The program later consulted with East African journalists, linked this time to the Third East African Health and Scientific Conference held in Nairobi, 25–27 March 2009. A half-day symposium supported by CCAA within the conference allowed journalists to share experiences on challenges in communicating science, environment, and climate change information to diverse audiences, particularly policymakers. In addition, it provided an opportunity to share knowledge from ongoing research activities and give policymakers more background on adaptation to climate change.

Participants identified lack of trust as a key barrier to effective communication among scientists, journalists, and policymakers. Policymakers see scientists as overly technical and too slow in delivering research results in a simple form. Scientists think policymakers pander too much to voters at the expense of sound science. And journalists are seen by policymakers and scientists as sensationalists, focusing on trivia at the expense of important issues. These attitudes have bred much mistrust among the three groups, resulting in poor communication and undermining the effectiveness of development planning and policy. Participants challenged CCAA to help facilitate forums for them to better appreciate each other's roles, needs, and constraints.

The outcomes of this symposium will help CCAA formulate strategies to strengthen coverage of climate change and adaptation — such as working with media-training institutions in the region, sustaining relationships with journalist networks, and identifying opportunities to share research stories.