

MEDIA MANAGERS IN ENVIRONMENT COVERAGE



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THE ROLE OF MANAGERS IN COVERING  
THE ENVIRONMENT.

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# THE ROLE OF MANAGERS IN COVERING THE ENVIRONMENT.

AUGUST 10th, 1984.

Kaluki woke up with a start for the day was to be long. Today she had to hurry the preparation of breakfast and dispatch of the children to school. Today she was to lead women in the construction of the last subsurface dam. Kaluki lives in Kalama in Machakos. Although this is the last dam, she has never read or heard anything in the radio about their work. That does not matter to her since after today their group will join the others who have clean water all year round. The children will no longer have worms and scarbies.

Once they finish the last dam on this river, they will begin to irrigate. That will be nothing compared to collecting stones and carrying them with kyondos for miles to the dam sites. It will be easier than plastering dams. They have already tried the old and new crops to be irrigated in one dam site. They know they will grow.

Fifty miles away to the southeast, in Nzau, Mwendu woke up late. The night before she spent eight hours akiluilila (waiting for the water to seep into the well) water. She had to get enough for the four gallon plastic mtungi which will have to last three days. It will have to last that long since her mwethya group has decided that they were to spend the next three days digging the trenches for the water line which was to come from the place where the first ancestors landed on earth. Her village is doing this work now, in the middle of the worst drought in memory. Since there are many women in the village, who are followers of the traditional goddess Kathambi, they had refused to work when neighbouring villages were building the water scheme because the intake was on Kathambi's temple. As a result, the inhabitants of her village, manzaa, (the famine village) are outcasts who still must wait for water to seep through the sand in the donga (dry sand river). Even more abnoxious is the fact, when they go to the regional market, they are not allowed to wash in the public bathhouse for they did not contribute labour to the water scheme.

Four hundred miles to the northwest, in Siaya, Atieno woke up the same day fulfilled. The previous night, the whole village had held a dance to celebrate the planting of the trees. They have been planting trees for four years now. In most of the homesteads, there are woodlots. In every boundary, there are trees for fuel. Since they also planted trees which make manure from the air, the crops this year look better - just like they used to look long time ago when one opened new land every year. Atieno is happy it is her granddaughter who writes all the things they do. That one will make a good wife for someone for she is so respected by the people even though she only went to school for three years.

Six hundred miles almost due east, Amina woke up tired. But, she was grateful to Allah that the pollinating work was over. The previous day she, and her group, spent the day with the unbeliever. He was showing them how to hand pollinate the date trees. Her group agreed to suffer like this only after they had sold the previous year's dates which the unbeliever had hand pollinated himself. They earned Ksh. 10,000.





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No women group in Northeastern Province had ever earned that much money. Such money is only earned by the camel trader, Bashir, who also sells ghat and sugar.

AUGUST 10th, 1986.

Wananchi should elect proper leaders for women groups. This was said by Mukyeeye wa Kutiwa, when he was touring Kalama location where he met ten women group leaders. Mukyeeye wa Kutiwa is the District Social Development Officer.  
Daily Nation. From the Districts.

A miracle is taking place in Nzau where the combined efforts of an international NGO and enlightened local leadership have led to the construction of a gravity water project in this desolate corner of Kenya. Standard. Sunday Features.

Educated people have been asked to contribute to the development of their areas. This was said by the Chairman of Sielewi Welfare Association, Upuzi wa Milele, when he inaugurated a nursery at Siaya. Kenya Times. From the Regions.

According to the Garissa District Annual Report, the women of the area have made strides in development and are now taking part in nation building. There are 10 organised women groups in the district. They are planning to exhibit in the Garissa Self Help Show.  
VOK Radio. Women Features.

#### COVERAGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IS PROBLEMATIC.

Covering the Environment, in the Kenyan situation, is problematic as we have tried to show in the fictionalised introduction. Beyond the issues raised by our unorthodox introduction, a quick perusal of the prepared conference materials shows the range of sectors which must be systematically covered if media is to cover the environment. From the sectoral approach one can clearly see that to cover the environment is to cover the universe. However, my paper is not aimed at discussing the problems of reporting on the environment by adopting the sectoral approach. It is supposed to deal with the process itself and what media managers have to do with the process. It comments on what is desirable.

#### ENVIRONMENT IS NOT NEWS.

When KENGO held a workshop for journalists, in Homa Bay, one of their major statements was that issues of the environment do not make news as far as their managers were concerned. As if to prove the point, many news stories were filed from Homa Bay. Only about 5 per cent were published.

Is environment not news because managers do not perceive it as such? Are managers not informed? What are the audiences for environmental issues?

journalists, who were at Homa Bay, failed to get most of their news



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stories published, they turned them into features. That is symptomatic of the general approach of the media in Kenya. When stories do not pass the test of news, invariably they surface as features. This anachronism can perhaps be explained by the absence of news features as a major category in the media nationally. But this is not the whole story.

#### EDITORIALS, FEATURES AND COLUMNISTS.

Perusal of the the Kabarnet conference package shows that whatever has environmental content, and is appearing in the printed media, is either editorials, features or opinion columns. The only few exceptions are the clear situations where major newsmakers, for example the President or a minister, are doing an activity which is environment related. Good examples are building gabions, making statements on drugs etc.

#### Editorials.

Where editorials are found, they are addressed to the policy level and usually not to the people involved in the particular issue. Out of our caricature above, the editorial may run on how ministries of water and or agriculture may wish to assist women groups in tree planting or building dams because the President is interested in conservation. Clearly then the issue is not whether the media managers know about the environment. The fact is, they usually write and control editorials. That these have environment content is evidence of media managers familiarity with the subjects.

However, it seems to me that media managers have an obligation to shift the focus of their editorials to speak about Kaluki, Mwende, Atieno and Amina, who are the movers of environmental issues and not just passive objects of these issues.

Let me be more explicit. In the first village of my caricature, that women build dams is no longer an issue locally. It is, though, a major issue nationally for society does not know they do and thus does not give them credit.

Women pollinating date trees by hand is not only a local issue, in the tradition bound arid areas of Kenya, but an issue for the whole nation. Tradition also holds Mwendes village hostage. That is a local as well as a national issue.

That women groups have innovated from tradition to deal with environmental issues without involvement of the major government ministries and other institutions, which are supposed to develop them, is an issue which calls for national comment.

In the editorial pages of the daily press, we should get editorials on the peculiar contribution of these groups. There should be editorials on how their activities inform or do not inform officialdom. The press should ask what officials and donors, who are supposed to be developing these areas are doing in juxtaposition to the environmentally sound developmental activities of the ordinary people.

Editorial opinion ought to emphasize the peculiar contributions being made by groups. For example in Nzau, by building the first public bathhouse in an arid area, and using the revenues derived from its operation to maintain the gravity water system, that community is indicating an important path to financing development. So is the Siaya group. It shows new ways of organising treeplanting without the tremendously high costs of either NGOs or ministries. Amina's group does





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show what one can do with the arid areas, where to date the Kenya nation has not thought out major development strategies within the confines of the environmental parameters of aridity. Dates do well in those areas. They are potentially an important crop for domestic use and even perhaps export. They were introduced by a church group but they will have to be extended by the Amins if they are to become a major crop. One does not have to be a genius to see the importance of this to overall national development.

#### Features.

If environmental issues creep in as features, that does not necessarily make the content particularly good. Most of the times, the features are what I call inspired journalism. Usually, the inspiration is from the so-called donors. I put it that way since wananchi who give their labor are never seen as donors. Take the story of Mwende's village in Nzau. The feature which brought the project to national attention was a public relations piece, commissioned by one donor whose contribution was, according to the project committee, less than 5% of the total cost. This donor had received bad publicity in other projects and in attempting to clean his public act, he got a friend, a non-Kenyan journalist, to go to the site and talk to the people. Of course the donor was the translator for this journalist who can only interview in English! The story was given to one of the dailies and it got very prominent play.

The feature concentrated on the food for work aspect. It did not acknowledge the Mwendes as the real project movers but only saw the male head of the project as the one who organised it.

This is simply bad journalism. No single individual makes a rural development project particularly when it is community based. It takes a community to do that. Such a community must change many traditions dear to itself and find peace with change. To achieve all the above, it MUST find organisational talent WITHIN itself.

The moral to the media managers is simply that they have to insist that the story be told in terms of the people who are making the critical decisions in activities which will make the environment a better place to live in. The changes to their way of doing things, properly covered in features, does contribute to giving other ordinary Kenyans the courage to face change and to understand the choices they have. Bureaucrats and donors can only assist communities to deal with environmental issues. Only communities and individuals can ride the changes essential for proper utilisation of the environment.

To stay with our example of Mwende's village, what environmental issues could have been raised by a good feature?

To get clean water within easy reach is to improve the health environment directly. It is also to release women labour from the hell of walking miles to nowhere for water. This has direct bearing on their health, time and thus local production and social life, not to speak of its contribution to the total welfare of the family as many studies have shown.

Communities also make it clear that getting clean water within easy reach is just the first step on the long road to development. As in Mwende's village they debate the next step which is likely to be new food crops. The drama of this debate is worthy of a good feature.



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And yet there is still that magical intangible—the pride of a community mobilised, not by a politician, or by a local bureaucrat, but, by its internal processes to tackle environmental issues which scare even the national institutions among them the media. This story should be told and loudly in features.

#### Columnists.

The few regular columnists, writing on environmental issues, have essentially concentrated on the issues which are current in the global perspective. This is not necessarily wrong, but, it is pitching to people running organisations and making policy. Whereas that level needs to be addressed, it, in my opinion, is not the most salient. If this society is to take issues of environment seriously and do something about it, and I think we can ignore environmental issues only to our national death, the columnists must begin to write for the average Kenyan. In other words beyond being able to communicate policy matters to those who need to know about global research, they must simultaneously address the Amina's. This is not easy but it can be done.

For example, most Kenyan policy makers, who come from ecological zones 2 and 3, do not think it will ever be possible to develop crop agriculture for Northeastern Province. Even professional agriculturalists, who ought to know better, have it written into public policy documents that "crop agriculture is not possible in Northeastern Province". They avidly believe this and preach it!

Yet crop agriculture has been tried and extended in Northeastern Province by many bodies for the last twenty years. There aren't just dates of Amina fame, there are grapes, citrus, assorted melons, avocados, buffalo gourds etc. Traditional "crops" like myrrh still earn people of the region significant amounts of money. Other traditional "crops" like gum arabica are being resuscitated. Dryland techniques for farming these areas are being developed and tried by many organisations and communities are adopting them. Columnists need to seek these out and to publicise them for they are truly heroic efforts.

Columnists furthermore write on environmental issues in the language and spirit of the coloniser. This is to say that they concentrate on telling us what we could be borrowing from somewhere else. They believe that such borrowing should make a difference in our lot. Why should they do this rather than concentrating on what we, and our friends, working side by side, are doing now?

This problem can be solved partially by sensitising those journalists from without, who are writing these columns. But, perhaps more important media managers ought to reduce the number of externally derived features which touch on some of these issues in a superficial way given our needs.

What is the point of running a Compass News feature on the desert date, (balanites aegyptica) telling us how it does in the Sahel, without also telling us that Kenyan peoples have used this tree since time immemorial and that we have four varieties out of which a Kenyan scientist, at the University of Nairobi, has made better grease than that made out of petroleum? The point can only be that media wants us to continue believing we are fools.





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It is important that media managers also find ways and means of allocating resources and personnel to writing on the local perspectives. This will involve getting much more knowledge about ALL PARTS OF the country than has been shown to date. For example only those who want to write about the so called jade sea also incidentally write about the starving Turkana people. Yet many people in Turkana know about water harvesting and spreading to ensure tree and crop growth. Let the columnists write about this rather than how the Israelis do it. Clearly one of the functions of columns must be to give information to people on where they can go and get knowledge locally. If Turkanas are able to start dryland farming, this may give the Orma, in Tana River, the courage to start. Columnists can play an important role in educating all of us on the many things we-the Kenya nation- have tried and mastered for we need this faith in ourselves.

### HOW DO WE GET ENVIRONMENT INTO NEWS?

This is not an idle question for there is the rub. We have seen how journalists themselves state that their managers do not see environmental issues as news.

We have also, through our caricatures, shown how the real environmental news makers do not qualify and how others touring or visiting projects of major environmental import become the news themselves.

From this, several obvious conclusions emerge. First, it is imperative that media managers who assign, develop greater sensitivity to environmental issues and their impact to the wider society. Only by familiarising themselves with the substantive issues, say to the same competence as they have with regard to political issues in the nation, will they be able to assign journalists to cover the Kenyan environment in a meaningful way.

This will call for special training for issues of the environment are not as simple as issues of politics which can be boned on at random. Second, media organisations ought to make an effort to get staff to specialise on environmental issues in the same way they specialise say in courts, or education or business. This will mean that on daily basis, particular journalists will be looking out for the environmental slant to stories. This may well be the easier one to implement. Thirdly, the media managers must struggle with their definition of a newsmaker. They must begin to include the Kalukis, Mwendwes, Atienos and Aminas. They are transforming this society and thereby making news. The problem is with us who do not recognise the role they play.

### CONCLUSION.

As long as media managers perceive environmental issues as belonging to the editorial pages, the press will not play the role of sensitising this society, particularly the average mwananchi to the issues. If anything, such relegation will continue the lie that ordinary Kenyans are not concerned about environmental issues. Only by bringing the contribution of these Kenyans to the center of news, will the press assist this nation to know of its varied environmental activities and give courage to the assorted Kenya peoples to continue to struggle with their environment with creativity and hope.