

Evaluating Opinion Leadership Strategies Used to Communicate Adaptive Climate Change Information to Residents of Arid and Semi Arid Areas in Kenya

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Abstract- This study assessed the effectiveness of opinion leadership strategies used in communicating adaptive climate change information to residents of arid and semi arid areas (ASALs) in Kenya. It sought to achieve this by assessing (1) the knowledge levels on adaptive climate change information among residents of Kenyan ASALs (2) attributes of opinion leaders who communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs and (3) strategies used by opinion leaders to communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs. The study found that adaptive climate change information disseminated by opinion leaders is inadequate, shallow and confusing because it is not crafted in consideration of the unique situations affecting residents of Kenyan ASALs. It concluded that with training and support from communication and research experts, local opinion leaders can enhance access to and use of adaptive climate change information among Kenyan ASAL residents.

Index Terms- adaptive climate change information, opinion leadership strategies, interpersonal communication, ASALs of Kenya.

I. INTRODUCTION

Kenyan arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) are home to more than 30% of the country's population (NEMA, 2013). Majority of the ASALs' residents are pastoralists, supporting over 70% of the livestock in the country, and agro-pastoralists (NEMA, 2013). Livestock raised by pastoralists is worth US\$800 million per year (USAID, 2012). Therefore, the government under Vision 2030 (GoK, 2008) recognizes the potential of ASALs as an important driver for economic growth (Kitiem et al, 2012). However, climate change, a global challenge, is a huge threat to persons living in Kenyan ASALs not only because of their high dependency on climate-sensitive natural resources and high poverty rates (Kitiem et al, 2012) but also because of the status of adaptive capacity of the people and institutions (GoK, 2013).

Therefore, ASAL farmers and pastoralists, as well as policy makers, development and humanitarian programmes are searching for the best ways to adapt to the impacts of climate change (Percy, 2013). Improving development outcomes such as social networks and access to information services is critical to building adaptive capacity (NCCAP, 2012). In Kenya, although

research, workshops, conferences and other engagements by various governmental and non-governmental bodies from all over the world have resulted into a pool of invaluable information on the subject of climate change, such information is either consolidated or scattered at various levels of its management with evident challenges to its access by relevant stakeholders (NCCAP, 2012).

However, although to access climate change information communication plays a key role, lack of proper communication mechanisms has led to inadequate climate change adaptation among ASALs' residents (KCCWG, 2013). This study therefore sought to examine effectiveness of opinion leadership, a renowned interpersonal communication method, in communicating adaptive climate change information among residents of Kenyan ASALs.

1.1 Statement of the problem

The way in which adaptive climate change information is communicated needs to be understandable, accessible, and acceptable to the end users (Nderitu, 2013). Interpersonal communication methods (e.g. face to face, workshops, opinion leaders) which are rated as rich media for communicating change (Lengel and Daft, 1988), have been used in a bid to improve communication of the essential adaptive climate change information among Kenyan ASALs (KCCWG, 2013; Nderitu, 2013; Shaka, 2013). However, in spite of their application, awareness levels and adaptive capacity to climate change are still low (KCCWG, 2013). Adaptive climate change information is scanty or totally absent at community level in ASALs of Kenya (KCCWG, 2013). It is against this background that this study sought to assess opinion leadership strategies being used to communicate adaptive climate change information among residents of Kenyan ASALs.

1.2 Objectives

The study had three specific objectives:

- (i) to assess the knowledge levels on adaptive climate change information among residents of Kenyan ASALs
- (ii) to evaluate attributes of opinion leaders who communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs
- (iii) to examine the strategies used by opinion leaders to communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND (LITERATURE REVIEW)

2.1 Knowledge levels on adaptive climate change information in Kenyan ASALs.

On 30th August 1994, Kenya ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) thereby signifying her determination to join the international community in combating the problem of climate change (NEMA, 2005). Kenya then moved to prepare its Initial National Communication (INC) and presented it to the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UNFCCC in 2002. The INC concluded amongst other issues, major effort was required to educate, train and inform the public about climate issues in a responsible and effective way (NEMA, 2005).

A capacity needs assessment in the area of climate change awareness in 2005 largely confirmed that the level of awareness of climate change in Kenya at the time was very low. With the growing concern on climate change, the Kenyan government established the National Climate Change Activities Coordinating Committee (NCCACC) and among the aims of the NCCACC is creation of public information and awareness (Ogola, 2011). Today, climate change awareness in Kenya is different from 2005 especially because various events that have raised climate awareness have occurred since then.

However, climate change awareness in Kenya is still quite low; there is still a lack of general awareness about climate change issues, about the existence of the UNFCCC, and about the opportunities it provides for mitigation and adaptation to climate change (Ogolla, 2011). An opinion poll carried out between 2007 and 2008 by the Gallup, revealed that over 44% of Kenyans have no knowledge of climate change (HBF, 2010). Similarly, the survey undertaken during the development of the National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP) in 2012 confirmed that public awareness about climate change in Kenya is very low, confirming similar findings during the development of the National Climate Change Response Strategy (NCCRS, 2013-2017). NCCAP states that even though significant climate change knowledge is currently generated by Kenyan institutions and individuals including government, research and academic institutions, civil society organisations (CSOs) and private sector companies, there is limited sharing of climate change information and knowledge. Its access and use have been inhibited by factors such as language barrier, unsuitable mode of communication, poor infrastructure, and poor repackaging of the information (KCCWG, 2013).

This low level of awareness is even worse in the ASALs of Kenya. In the published '*report on access and use of climate change information in the ASALS*', KCCWG (2013) noted that although majority of the people across ASAL counties in Kenya were aware of the fact that something is happening to their climate, they did not rightly associate it with the concept and phenomenon of climate change; and that though they were able to identify the impacts of climate change, they lacked access to climate change information. Very few ASAL districts in Kenya to date receive radio and television coverage even after the liberalization of the airwaves (UNDP, 2010). Although, there are some magazines in the country that specialize on climate change reporting (e.g. *Joto Afrika*, a quarterly magazine that carries climate change research briefings by African scientists launched

in 2011, and *The Weatherman*, a monthly publication by the Kenya Meteorological Society), the number of ASAL residents who can access or have literacy skills to benefit from these publications remains limited.

This notwithstanding, access to information on climate change characteristics is a very powerful tool that can be used to enhance the adoption and implementation of adaptation strategies by households in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (Antwi-Agyei et al, 2013) where Kenya is. This is particularly important because most farming in SSA depends on rain-fed agricultural systems and as such lack of appropriate climate information could be critical for food security ((IPCC, 2007; Antwi-Agyei et al, 2013). A majority of this group are poor rural people. Access and use of climate change information would empower such vulnerable communities to make their own calculated and climate informed decisions on livelihood and risk management choices (Percy, 2013) and as such be able to successfully implement climate adaptation strategies (Lee, 2007).

Sadly, there have been information access barriers to successful implementation of adaptation practices in SSA (Antwi-Agyei et al, 2013) and to increase the low knowledge levels, adaptive climate change information needs to be communicated in ways that are affordable and understandable by Kenyan ASAL residents who have long been marginalized politically, socially and economically (FAO, 2013). Like many other publics, residents of ASALs are increasingly distrustful of both news and advertising from mass media, preferring instead recommendations from friends, family, coworkers, and peers (Keller & Berry, 2003). This is where opinion leadership communicative interventions come in handy and there is therefore need to understand individuals who act as opinion leaders on the subject of climate change in ASALs.

2.2 Attributes of opinion leaders who communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs.

For effective opinion leadership campaigns, it is important to first recruit individuals in a social system that can make effective opinion leaders (OLs). This recruitment should be based on desired traits and behaviours of such personalities which according to Katz (1957) can be divided into a few dimensions: *Who one is* - certain personality characteristics or values held by the individual; *What one knows* - the degree of knowledge and expertise that one has about a particular issue or product; and *Whom one knows* - the number of contacts one has as part of their circle of friends and acquaintances.

According to Katz, OLs seem evenly distributed among the social, economical, and educational levels within their community, but very similar in these areas to those they influence. Loudon and Britta (1979) corroborate this when they say that OLs have approximately the same social-class position as non leaders, although they may have higher social status within the class. As such OLs do not necessarily hold formal positions of power or prestige in communities but rather serve as the connective communication tissue that alert their peers to what matters among political events, social issues, and consumer choices (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Vaneck, Jager & Leefalang, 2011).

However, OLs are better educated and more affluent than the average person and it is their interest and belief that they can

make a difference in the world around them that makes them influential (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). They are individuals who pay close attention to an issue, frequently discuss the issue, and consider themselves more persuasive in convincing others to adopt an opinion. When compared to their peers, OLs tend to be more exposed to all forms of external communication (Flodgren et al, 2011); they are active media users who interpret the meaning of media content for lower-end media users. This two-step flow process effectively bounces the message off the OL into the minds of his/her followers.

OLs are people who are seen as likeable, trustworthy and influential (Flodgren et al, 2011). The Social Learning Theory hypothesizes that such individuals are likely to be persuasive agents of behavioural change. They hold a unique and influential position in their system's communication structure; they are at the centre of interpersonal communication networks (Flodgren et al, 2011). OLs are more gregarious than nonleaders (Loudon & Britta, 1979). Individuals with strong personality traits of confidence, leadership, and persuasiveness are found to be socially connected to a greater number of other community members and more likely to influence the opinions of others (Weimann, 1994).

Until only very recently, public communication initiatives have ignored such special individuals across communities and social groups that can serve as vital go-betweens and information brokers, passing on messages about climate change that speak directly to their otherwise inattentive peers, co-workers and friends; they remain an overlooked yet necessary resource when it comes to catalyzing collective action on climate change (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). In Kenya, OLs have started being appreciated in cascading of climate change information among the vulnerable ASAL communities.

As reported in *Joto Afrika* in June 2013, in Garissa (an ASAL County), "When the area Chief received a phone call about the impending floods due to excessive rainfall in areas upstream of River Tana, he informed the community about it. The community members did not ignore the early warning as they used to do before" (Nderitu, 2013:6). In Kitui, another ASAL County in the country, community leaders, religious leaders, government officers and NGO officials in their line of duty have been engaging residents on adaptive climate change topics such as livelihood diversification (KCCWG, 2013). Residents reported that, "Most of the information on climate change was dispensed through government officers (27.4%) while 22.6% said that they had accessed the information through community leaders. Another 17.7% had learnt from local community farmers and herders, while 9.7% learnt from Oxfam and other NGOs. Others had got information from religious leaders (3.2%)" (KCCWG, 2013: 17).

Although, these individuals have characteristics similar to those highlighted by Katz (1957) and other scholars (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Flodgren et al, 2011; Weimann, 1994), the more important question to ponder is whether or not these OLs have been influential in enhancing access to adaptive climate change information among residents of Kenyan ASALs.

Research in four ASAL counties (Wajir, Kajiado, Kitui and Turkana) of Kenya by KCCWG (2013) establishes that information similar to climate change dispensed by community leaders, religious leaders, government and NGO officials in their

line of duty is inadequate, shallow and almost confusing. The researchers conclude that it was not specifically packaged as climate change information. Extension workers, for instance, confirmed that they did not package the information as climate change information but as agriculture information which they then disseminated during farmer field days. Likewise information on livestock management, disseminated by livestock officers and NGOs like VSF Belgium and VSF Germany, was not given out specifically as climate change information (KCCWG, 2013). Could such impediments to effective dissemination of adaptive climate change information be caused by the strategies used by these OLs?

2.3 Strategies used by opinion leaders to communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs.

In climate change opinion leadership campaigns, identification and recruitment are just the first stages of organizing (Nisbet and Kotcher, 2009). Crafting suitable strategies of influencing change form the core of the campaign. These strategies, according to Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) range from methods of message development, framing and packaging; choice of channels and methods that OLs will use to disseminate information; education, training and support of OLs by key stakeholders; to regular monitoring and evaluation of the processes in use.

For effectiveness, messages need to be tailored to core ideas and values that resonate with the social background of the OL. Moreover, the OL needs to be trained on how to deliver these messages to their social network. This includes introducing OLs to the research that went in to designing the message along with extensive role playing for how that message might be delivered across contacts. In particular, when possible, carefully framed messages should be matched to an OL's demographic using micro-targeting data, cluster analysis, or other market segmentation techniques (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). In Kenyan ASALs, according to the KCCWG (2013) report, projects by network partners on the ground address adaptation to climate change impacts but the implementers (OLs) do not quite relate the activities to climate change when communicating to residents.

For many residents of Kenyan ASALs, a complex issue such as climate change can be the ultimate ambiguous threat; meaning that depending on how the problem is framed the public will pay more attention to certain dimensions or considerations of climate change over others. These framed messages can lead to very specific attributions about the nature and personal relevance of climate change, who or what might be responsible for the problem, and what should be done in terms of policy, political activity, or personal behavior (Nisbet, 2009; Nisbet & Mooney, 2007; Nisbet, Scheufele, 2007). **According to Jones (2010)**, the key to success in OL campaigns is in the ability to keep things simple and flexible. In this context, 'simple' means two things; firstly, having a learning goal that is not overly ambitious, and then creating an experience that is easy for the OL and target audience to understand and participate. The communication challenge is to shift climate change from the mental box of "uncertain science" to a new cognitive reference point that connects to something the specific intended audience already

understands (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). Since literacy levels in ASAL districts of Kenya are as low as 3% compared with a national average of 79.3% (UNDP, 2010) the need for simplified messages cannot be overemphasized.

Theoretically, OLs use a range of interpersonal communication skills and methods in order to achieve desired behavioural change. Studies show that face-to-face recommendations are still overwhelmingly preferred over digital sources of information (Berry & Keller, 2006; Carl, 2006; Xue & Phelps, 2004) among many publics. Informal one to one teaching, community outreach education visits, small group teaching, academic detailing and preceptor-ships are examples of strategies used by OLs for disseminating and implementing change (Doumit et al, 2007). OLs also use formal strategies, such as delivering didactic lectures. Ryan (2002) says that whereas it is unclear whether information delivered by OLs in an informal way is more persuasive compared with formal strategies, it has been suggested that OLs may be less influential when their role is formalized through mail-outs, workshops or teaching rounds. From ASALs of Kenya, when Mbeere farmers reported that access to forecast information enabled timely decisions and action for on-farm operations, twenty groups of farmers rated face to face access as their preferred method, with radio and mobile phones next" (Njuki, 2013: 5).

According to Nisbet & Kotcher (2009), OLs can also be used to sponsor civic voice through engaging in activities that communicate to policy makers, institutions, corporations, and other citizens' their concern and policy preferences. Examples include contacting an elected official such as a governor or senator, writing a letter to the editor of a newsstudy, calling in to a radio/television show, posting on a blog or any other social network, signing a petition, or attempting to persuade peers on the issue. When surges in communication and public attention are needed, such as surrounding the release of a future Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, OLs can be activated with talking points to share in conversations with friends and coworkers. Networks of OLs can be activated in reaction to major natural disasters and focusing events such as droughts, wildfires, and extreme weather. From reviewed literature, exploitation of these strategies is yet to be seen in use by OLs in the ASALs of Kenya as they communicate adaptive climate change information.

Research also suggests that the setting (such as a complex social network) of an OL may be important for success (Grimshaw et al, 2006). Strongly held beliefs, cultural practices, value systems and the worldviews of individuals or groups, greatly influence the way they perceive climate change and thereby their subsequent adaptation strategies (Antwi-Agyei et al, 2013). Jones and Boyd (2011) observed that societal norms and values act as major barrier to successful climate adaptation. In addition, poorly developed communication and marketing infrastructures complicate the task of developing location-specific responses that effectively address the impacts of climate change (Farauta, et al, 2011). In this regard, the appreciation of the communication context within which climate adaptation takes place is quite critical if OL influence is to be effective. In Kenya, it is definitely not an easy task to communicate adaptive climate change information when dealing with the socio-economically marginalized ASAL audiences who are from

diverse ethnic and cultural orientations. The new County governance system in the country is yet to be understood so that getting support resources to overcome such barriers is quite difficult for OLs.

This notwithstanding, opinion leaders continue to be used in Kenya to boost ASALs' residents cognitive engagement on the issue of climate change adaptation and increase the frequency of community discussion on the topic. However, the efforts of these opinion leaders are fragmented and disjointed and they do not come out clear on the subject of climate change (KCCWG, 2013). As such, the process requires a monitoring and evaluation component for effectiveness of programs and impacts.

All in all, the role of opinion leaders in moving forward the climate change agenda and communicating relevant information among the Kenyan ASAL residents cannot be underscored if appropriate utilization of the abundant knowledge and information on climate change effects on human survival is to be achieved.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was based on literature review related to the knowledge levels on adaptive climate change information among residents of Kenyan ASALs and attributes of opinion leaders who communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs. In addition, the study examined ways in which these opinion leaders communicate adaptive climate change information to residents of Kenyan ASALs. Online and print literature of journals, reports and working papers among other publications were reviewed.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study has made the following conclusions based on the reviewed literature:

Specific kinds of barriers to adaptation to climate change can be softened by interpersonal influence and the strategic use of opinion leaders. This is because since as early as the 1940s, scholars have understood the general importance of opinion leaders in shaping public preferences, informing fellow citizens, and altering behavior. In addition, people do not feel they are being tricked into thinking a certain way about something when they get it from someone they know. As such opinion leaders have been successfully used in climate change campaigns and they can therefore be used successfully among Kenyan ASALs' residents.

However, effective opinion leadership is earned and sustained by the individual's communication prowess, social accessibility, and adherence to socio-cultural norms of the target group. In addition, in order to effectively use opinion leadership to resolve the low awareness levels on climate change among residents of Kenyan ASALs, crafting and packaging this rather complex issue into simpler specific messages that connect to the day to day activities of the ASAL populace is important.

V. RECOMMENDATION

- Opinion leaders who communicate adaptive climate change information among residents of Kenyan ASALs need to be acquainted with communication skills to enable them to carefully consider the cultural, social and psychological contexts of communication among residents of Kenyan ASALs when designing adaptive climate change messages. As such, they will successfully craft relevant, acceptable and simple messages on climate change adaptation that are more likely to result into effective discourse.
- The OLs should be supported and trained on how to strategically initiate informal conversations with friends and acquaintances so that they can deliberately frame messages in ways that are more persuasive to the low literate and socio-economically challenged ASAL populace of Kenya.
- Opinion leaders should also engage in audience research to continually get information that will enable them develop successful messages about climate change adaptation. They should be therefore be trained on basic research skills.
- County governance can liaise with communication and climate change experts across the country to offer such training. Such experts can provide examples of well crafted climate change conversational messages, show models of how conversations might play out, and use role play to illustrate different types of conversational situations.
- Regular monitoring and evaluation of OLs efforts should be part of OLs' strategies. This will enable tracking of effectiveness of their strategies so that improvement can be done regularly. OLs and communication experts can work together to develop scalable methods and strategies for assessing OL campaign impacts regularly.

By taking these steps, the influence of opinion leadership on climate change adaptation among residents of Kenyan ASALs will be enhanced.

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