

## **Communicating Climate Information.**

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### Introduction.

It is my sincere hope that this presentation will generate debate for us to answer some of the questions that are pertinent in the communication of climate forecasts.

This presentation is a synopsis of the communication component of the NOAA funded project: 'Improving Climate Forecast Communication for Farm Management in Uganda.' It draws on the experiences that have been gained in working with rural communities in Nakasongola district in the central Buganda region of Uganda where the Luganda is used. The other area is in the Kumi district in the Teso region where Ateso is spoken.

Because of the long title of the project: 'Improving Climate Forecast Communications for Farm Management in Uganda' our collaborators found it quite a mouthful and so we decided to shorten it to 'The Climate Communications Project.'

This presentation will also briefly mention the work that I have spearheaded in developing climate media networks in the Greater Horn of Africa and Southern Africa. I will also touch on training the media to take up climate journalism in Africa and lately Asia. There is a lot that the media and climate scientists have shared and learnt from one another. The learning process has just started and there are signs of a brighter future on the horizon.

Communicating weather forecasts and other climate information to the general public is quite problematic in all parts of the world. Even where the audience is extremely literate it is not automatic that the recipients will grasp the gist of the message that is being disseminated.

This is because climate scientists often speak in a language that only they understand best. When they disseminate scientific information they do so using jargon that they are comfortable with. Quite often they take it for granted that others not in their field of speciality will take the trouble to struggle and understand what they are saying.

The truth is that to the ordinary recipient of information will discard anything that gives them a headache to make sense of. Besides they are being bombarded with so much information all the time that they have a wide range of alternatives to choose from. This is across the board whether you are transmitting to a sophisticated audience in Washington or to simple rural peasants in Kumi.

### Communicating Climate Information in Uganda.

To appreciate the importance of climate communication in Africa, one needs to understand the rural livelihoods of the continent. The biggest percentages of the

population live in rural areas and are dependent on agriculture for a living. It is a rain fed agricultural system and discussions on the weather and climate are on the lips of the common people all the time.

They worry about a possible delay in the onset of rains or the early cessation of the rains. In fact it may surprise you that the weather update is an integral part of the formal greeting when people meet. After 'how are you?' the question that follows is 'is it raining your end?' Usually if the weather is fine, they continue to inquire about the welfare of the close family members and livestock. But somehow, the greeting enters reverse gear back to the weather.

It may be about how this years rains have been so good that the crops will bear a bumper crop and they are unlikely to suffer from food insecurity unlike the other year, which was so bad. It is therefore against this background that communicating climate forecasts in local languages in built.

Unlike what some people may think, the rural subsistence farmers who dominate farming in the countryside, are very much appreciative of climate information. This is reinforced by the findings at the grassroots when carrying out field data collection in Uganda. We found that not only were they willing to discuss about climate forecasts but that they were aware of the uncertainties associated with forecasts.

The first challenge with the communications that we are carrying out in Uganda is the fact that it is being done in local languages. Climate forecasts are in most regions disseminated in 'official' languages. In Africa this is mainly in English, French or Arabic.

In Uganda prior to the ongoing work the weather and seasonal forecasts issued by the Department of Meteorology have been in English, which is the official language of communication. However the people in the rural areas communicate in their local dialects depending on the region where they live. We have therefore had to develop messages in the local languages in order to disseminate the seasonal climate forecasts in the Luganda dialect.

There were extensive interviews, narratives and detailed study with the farmers in the district to come up with the different terminologies in the Luganda. Recordings of the responses and discussions in the field research study formed a crucial input in the radio messages formulation.

As part of the data collection for the radio programs, we seek to capture the local climate forecasting and the coping mechanisms adopted by the people when extreme climate events occur. These messages are incorporated in the seasonal forecasts that are translated from the English version.

The relevance of this approach is to show the people we are working with that the new translated forecasts are not a replacement to what they were using before but is complimentary. This is a necessary measure to build a level of confidence in the audience

as well as appreciate that they have an existing system that we are building on rather than rubbish.

It is not enough to just develop messages and leave it at that. The farmers are involved in the radio program development from an early stage. They form what we now call Climate Communication Radio Listening Groups (CORAL Groups). These have become the nucleus of discussion groups about the seasonal climate forecasts that have shown a strong thirst for a continued dissemination of climate information as we have witnessed in Nakasongola.

In discussions with the people what comes to the fore again and again is that they have noticed a dramatic change in the climate patterns of their areas. The rains are not coming at the right moments and they are fighting to cope with the changes. This is in line with the widespread fears that there are marked changes in the global climate.

At the moment climate scientists cannot pronounce with authority that climate changes are taking place or predict with certainty when they are due to happen. At several international climate meetings scientists have been hesitant to commit themselves as to whether climate change is actually taking place and where it has as yet occurred. Of course scientists are wary of pronouncing much about climate change because they have to make observations of the daily weather over a long period of time normally stretching over three decades or more.

Changes in weather patterns have been physically observed in recent years. In addition extreme climate events especially droughts and flooding have occurred at greater frequency. With over 80% of the population engaged in agriculture that is dependent on rain-fed agriculture changes in the climate are very important and a real threat to millions of rural livelihoods. But what we are learning is that, farmers are taking action to survive.

Several years ago, it was possible for the local farming communities to determine the onset of the rains and possible cessation with a fair amount of accuracy. These days, it is not a guarantee that the long rains will start by the third week or fourth week of February in a given year. Rains to run through May and end in June/early July are stopping earlier than June. On the other hand the rains have been known to take a swing in the other direction and extend throughout June and part of July as it happened this year.

They vividly recall the effects of recent severe El Nino events of 1997-1998 that caused massive flooding and they cringe whenever there are signs of its reoccurrence. The La Nina climate event cause severe drought and they say the last event was the worst in living memory-1994/95. Are African farmers noticing changes in the climate around them? Yes...very much so. Working with these rural communities in Uganda farmers have testified not only noticing changes in the daily weather but also of certain natural resources either disappearing altogether or getting scarce.

These are seemingly simple resources around the home environment that they have put to use over generations. One natural resource that they repeatedly say is fast disappearing is

thatching grass. The Ateso people have for as long as they could remember used a special grass type they call 'asisinit' to thatch their houses.

It makes strong beautiful roofs that last for a long time. However these days it is becoming rare. The reason is that the grass does very well at the edge of swamps. Farmers have invaded the swampy areas to farm rice and grow millet because the swamps are cooler and store water for a long time.

This is a coping mechanism that the farmers in Teso have taken as a result of increased frequency of droughts over the years. As an alternative to the 'asisinit' grass they are using another type of grass for roofing- 'ebiya' or elephant grass. This grass is not so beautiful neither does it last so long.

In the same area certain trees that were excellent building and roofing material are no longer available. They used to have the 'elira' tree, which was very good for roofing, but now they do not know what happened to the tree. It is no more. Instead they have to resort to using 'acacia' tree species and the imported eucalyptus tree.

In order to cope with the disappearing species, they have resorted to use fired bricks to build their houses and iron sheets to roof them. Well, the outcome is improved housing in form of permanent housing but not as comfortable as the traditional one which were much cooler in comparison given the hot persistent hot weather.

In Nakasongola, Uganda as elsewhere in Africa farmers are coping with the changing weather patterns by growing a variety of crops. En masse planting of crops at the same time is no longer the in thing to do. Rather farmers interviewed say that they stagger the planting over a few weeks such that if the first crops fail the ones planted later will not fail.

We are also witnessing another coping mechanism that we have come across as we develop climate communication program: The people are just moving away from the vagaries of the weather. There is a mass migration from the rural areas to the urban centres. It is true that towns have always offered the good modern things that the villages lack but why is it now that the people are abandoning the countryside in such large numbers. Consistent crop failures against a background of free-swinging market forces are not very conducive to scratch a living from the soil. What is the relationship between urban migration and the climate in Uganda and Africa in general? This may be a topical subject to examine in depth.

The work so far done in communicating climate forecasts in local languages may be a good foundation for further expansion into other language groups in the region.

### Developing Climate Communication Networks.

A few years back the media and the climate community were not talking to each other. Instead they were talking against each other. While one side felt that they were knew too

much about their speciality, the other side made fun of them claiming that they always got their predictions wrong.

Today things are different and are still changing. In the Greater Horn of Africa the journalists are now talking to one another. The cartoons, which depicted meteorologists as soothsayers, have remained in the past century.

What was the magic? Educating the journalists about the inner working of the climate community has brought a turn around in attitudes, understanding and created an atmosphere of mutual trust that is creating benefits to the public.

From the interaction in the climate outlook forum, we are now fanning out to individual countries in the Greater Horn of Africa and the South African countries where climate media associations are being formed. These are further strengthened by the formation of networks. In the Greater Horn of Africa country associations with governing committees have been formed. These are linking up with the Secretariat in Kampala. However the future activities of the network need to be funded.

The Southern Africa media climate network has just been formed. They are now in the process of in country formation of associations. I am helping to contribute together with several climate scientists and media personnel to organise the Media in the Asian region through the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre in Bangkok. The formation of this network is still in the nascent stage. The future will be more evident after a regional workshop takes place in Bangkok early next year.

#### Schools.

However it is not the adult journalists who are being networked. In one of the presentations that I made at a GHA Climate Outlook Forum last year, I proposed that we start building a dissemination network aiming at children who could influence their parents and community members. Working through the Department of Meteorology which had funds earmarked for a project in that line of thinking, I have linked one of the Primary Schools in Uganda to have the primary school children as disseminators of climate information and assist in passing on seasonal forecasts to their communities. The school is preparing an independent report that will be distributed during the workshop for the attention of participants.

Finally, together with colleagues interested in development through the dissemination of scientific information we have formed the Communications for Development (CODEVE). This is an NGO that seeks to move development to the rural livelihoods by using information as a change agent.

Thank you, for your attention. For God and My Country.