

Role of Media in foregrounding issues of desertification

By Tom Mashindi on the occasion of the launch of the 2006 Journalism Award for Excellence in Reporting Desertification in Africa, Nairobi Safari Club, October 18, 2006

In the time it will take the participants to get through two days' agenda at this seminar, thousands of acres of forest land will have been decimated as a result of human activity – mainly cutting down of forest cover to make way for one or the other human activity, for instance space to cultivate crops, build houses or to put up projects or provide energy. This destruction of forest cover is happening mainly in the developing world and particularly in Africa.

But destruction of forest cover has not always been only to make way for needed space for economic activity. If this were the case, the conflicts surrounding the use of land, and especially forest land, would be much less intense and certainly much less dangerous. Increasingly however, conflicts are accompanying disputes about land. People are dying, communities are fighting and very dangerous rivalries are being generated. Why is this the case?

Land issues have become politicized. Land in most parts of Africa remains a key resource that defines who is wealthy and who is not. It is also the most primal possession with which most people – especially men – define their identity. Most African men have an almost primordial attachment to their ancestral lands, the land that the great grand fathers bequeathed their sons, and so on along the line until now. In most African communities, people have a dual identity – the rural and the urban. This persuades most people to aspire to have some land, often without a rational explanation why they need it since most people do not use the land for commercial purposes.

But it is also true that agriculture forms the bedrock of most economies in Africa, again adding to the already intense pressure that land in the continent has been subjected to. Land in Africa is therefore being subjected to great pressure from the burgeoning populations that need to eat, towns that need space to grow, economies that need increased cash crop production. Ironically, changing weather patterns, themselves a direct consequence of destruction of forest cover and interference in the catchments areas, have added to this pressure.

As the primary definer of what forms wealth, land has taken on a pre-eminent role in the lives of most people, albeit for different reasons. To the farmer, it is the lifeline that guarantees a livelihood. To speculators, it is the black gold whose value continues to appreciate. To communities, it is the space that defines their character and guarantees continuity – the larger the area, the prouder the community and the greater the value they attach to themselves. To political

leaders, it is the tool for patronage – as the custodians of public land, presidents and others in authorities have not been averse to dishing out large chunks of land to buy loyalty and assure themselves support.

What am I leading to?

Simply this. That there is a direct correlation between what we are seeing happen around us and the relentless advance of desertification. These pressures that I have described in very general terms are all contributing to the use or misuse of forest cover in a manner that directly undermines its capacity to regenerate. By cutting down trees indiscriminately, by giving off large tracts of forest for whatever dubious or legitimate reasons, by not being able to manage the population's growth and relating it to what the land systems could support, by being unable to diversify our economies sufficiently and ease the dependence on land as the sole source of livelihood to huge populations, we have assisted in the desertification process.

And where does the mass media sit in all these?

Right at the centre. The thing with the media is that it is ubiquitous in our lives. Like our shadows, we cannot run away from the media. In fact, our reliance on the media has grown apace with the need for us to communicate with a lot of people at the same time. Media are the most reliable tools of communicating messages to a lot of people simultaneously. This is the basis of the cliché that the media sets the social agenda. This cliché vastly overrates the impact of the media but there is no doubting the potential media have to actually influence people's thinking.

To tackle desertification is a matter of great social importance that calls into play all the tools of social mobilization that we know of. Governments, communities, leaders at all levels, even individuals need to play their part. The challenge calls for changes in the legislative and policy environment, in the worldviews of people, in the actions of individuals and in the way communities relate to their land. There is therefore need to advocate to people directly – leaders, politicians, etc; mobilizing on a larger scale of communities to involve in awareness raising activities and communicating general information just to share knowledge.

The media have the capacity to do all these. Often however, the challenge is how to tell the story with the style and passion that makes the reader, the listener or the viewer pay attention. This is the dilemma that most editors and reporters find themselves in. Many have accepted the fallacy that the environment story generally, and the desertification one in particular, is a boring story.

I disagree and counter posit that this inability is both a failure on the part of reporters and their editors to appreciate the true challenge of the moment and a manifestation of incompetence due to creative paralysis. With sufficient interest

and passion about what desertification is doing and can do, there will be inspiration to generate powerful stories that will have an impact.

Before I am accused of wearing blinders and refusing to see what media has done and can do, let us acknowledge that there has been some great work done by some media across the continent. But this is work that has to do with reporting in environmental issues generally. Reports on destruction of forests have been plenty and Kenyan media have done really well here; drying up of lakes, challenges of urbanization, environmental pollution, tensions and conflicts over land, drought and their consequences, etc.

It is also true that some of the stories have had a positive effect like influencing passage of laws that protect forests. What most journalists do not do is nuance the stories properly so that the link between cause and effect is clear. Stories are too often presented as episodes in capsules, complete in themselves, and not as part of a continuum. In very few of the examples I have mentioned above will one find a deliberate link to desertification and other consequences.

Hopefully, the Award will challenge the journalists to write with the express purpose of drawing out the links between decisions, laws, actions of human beings and the ultimate outcome of desertification. The Award should also hopefully encourage journalists to seek different ways of telling stories so that the same messages are repeated all the time for them to linger. Success in communications comes out of repeated messaging. One off statements are often drowned in the deafening jumble of noises looking for space.

So, where are the stories?

- a) In the policy area are many stories that need to be told. What are local, municipal, regional and national authorities doing or not doing to curb the spread of desertification? How can some of these gaps be converted into riveting feature stories or magazine type programmes on radio, television and even internet?
- b) Where laws have been passed to curb the wanton destruction of forests, what impact are these having? Are the laws actually being implemented? Are the enforcement procedures and mechanisms able to extract compliance from the people? Are there any early signs that impact is being felt?
- c) There are heroes and heroines in every community doing great work to protect the environment in ways that may have direct bearing on desertification. Are we seeking these out and telling their stories to the public? In Kenya, for example, Prof Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition for her work in protecting the environment and linking the destruction of forests to conflicts and lack of

peace. We certainly have not exploited the opportunities that the recognition provides media to make a song and dance about the award. In other environments, a cult would be developed around such an event. The opportunity is still there and journalists must take advantage of it.

- d) Deliberate prioritization of the desertification story. Editors and media houses often decide to focus attention and resources on issues that they think are of importance. This could be crime, health, governance, etc. This is certainly a story that needs to get the priority treatments and a committed journalist to sell an idea to his/her editors and ensure that it gets the emphasis that it deserves.

Obviously, we do not want to give the impression that human beings should not derive livelihood from the environment. That would be naïve. The sole purpose of such reporting is to make the point that exploitation of the environment must demonstrate the sensitivity that it is a perishable product that however must remain to sustain the generations to come.

I congratulate the organizers of this workshop for recognizing that journalists have done a great job so far but need to direct fresh urgency to the desertification story. It needs to be covered with much greater passion and regularity. I am sure that the discussion about the reality and challenges of desertification today and tomorrow will demonstrate just how serious this challenge is. The journalists will leave this forum feeling motivated and fired up about this issue, if not because of the sobering information, certainly because of the appeal of a generous prize like the one we are launching and the prestige of the publicity that will generate for the winner.

As a former editor, I am aware of the critical role of editors in deciding what gets covered and what does not; how stories that have been prepared often do not get published or aired, etc. This has to do with politics of space or sometimes even personal relationships. But I am also aware that a determined and committed journalist can make a difference. Your power to persuade and a demonstrated commitment to an issue will carry along a skeptical editor and convince them to give you an opportunity to write and publish on desertification issues.

Having said that, I'd urge the IPS, the International Fund for Agricultural Development and other bodies active in the area to perhaps think of introducing similar or other incentives that seek to encourage other players in the media – especially the media houses themselves and specific editors – to pay more attention to issues of desertification.

For now, I congratulate the journalists that have undertaken this course and wish them well as they return to their newsrooms. I am also very happy and honored

to now officially launch the 2006 Journalism Awards for Excellence in Reporting Desertification in Africa that I am convinced will add great value in the regional and global efforts to foreground issues of desertification as a priority concern in the agendas of the media, governments and the general public.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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