

# Rescuing reporting in the global South

Media coverage of climate change lags behind in the countries where it matters most, reports **James Fahn**.

Climate change is a complex subject by any standard, but viewers in Indonesia watching TransTV during the UN conference on climate change in Bali last December must have been especially perplexed by one report on the national network's news broadcast. The reporter claimed that “global warming happens because of so many buildings made of glass.” A lack of scientific literacy, it seems, had led her to take the greenhouse effect too literally.

“I gave a training course recently for local journalists in Pekanbaru [an Indonesian province close to Singapore], and they did not really understand what global warming was. They did not even understand the greenhouse effect,” confirms Harry Surjadi, a former reporter with the *Kompas* news group in Jakarta who now heads up the Society of Indonesian Environmental Journalists.

It's not just Indonesia that suffers from poor-quality reporting. Jeff Hodson, a Thailand-based journalism trainer, recently led a workshop on climate change in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region, an area that scientists say could disappear under water if sea levels rise by a metre or more. “A majority of Vietnamese journalists in the workshop had never heard of the Bali conference,” says Hodson. “Even local officials involved in managing natural resources admitted they know very little about climate change. One said he just couldn't believe the sea might actually rise that high.”

Throughout most of the developing world, media coverage of global warming is woefully inadequate. Although there is a general realization that the climate is changing, ignorance about the causes and projected impacts is widespread. This deficit is especially worrying given that developing nations, collectively known as the global South, are usually the most vulnerable to impacts such as worsening drought and rising sea levels.



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Yet it isn't lack of commitment from journalists on covering complex science that's the problem, but rather the inordinate number of obstacles they face in reporting the issues for local media. Experts are now looking at how the quantity and quality of climate change reporting can be raised, mainly through donor-assisted journalism training programs.

## INFORMATION GAP

“Journalists in developing countries often have a mountain to climb when trying to cover climate change,” explains Mike Shanahan, the press officer for the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). “Few have a science background or have received training in climate-change reporting so it is unsurprising to see errors in stories about the technical aspects of the issue.”

According to Shanahan, developing-world journalists also lack access to research in peer-reviewed journals, experts

to interview, and other information. Research institutes in developing countries are often without a press office, and their scientists can be reluctant to talk to the media. “Even the most able journalists say they often face another obstacle in the newsroom in the form of editors who don't understand climate change or think it is important to cover,” adds Shanahan.

“There is no urgency among editors to put climate change as an important issue [in the media],” confirms Surjadi in Indonesia. “They do not really understand climate change. They think this is a developed country problem, not [one for] developing countries.” Even when it is addressed in local media, it is covered as an abstract global issue. Gustavo Faleiros, a reporter for the Brazilian online environmental news site *O Eco*, says the same problem exists in Brazil, where there is “a lack of local studies and debates on local perspectives.”

Mark Harvey of the international media development organization Internews says the dearth of developing-world



JAMES FAHIN

Vietnamese journalists participating in a climate change workshop interview one of the residents of a village hit by floods in north central Vietnam.

reporting results in a climate change information gap, borne out at events like the Bali climate conference. A scan of the initial media accreditation list there revealed that — apart from host-country journalists, who made up 25 per cent of those registered — only 9 per cent of the journalists registered to cover the summit came from the developing world.

After last year's reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change<sup>1</sup>, developed nations were inundated with coverage across all sections of the media. In the developing world, however, where the reports predicted that impacts would be most severe, coverage was lackluster<sup>2</sup>. India, Mexico and Russia had no mention of the reports on their evening news broadcasts; Chinese and South African TV mentioned only the IPCC's report on climate change impacts; the South African coverage lasted just 11 seconds. Perhaps most worryingly, no information was given on any channel in these major developing nations about how the poor would be affected.

Despite media reporting on climate change in the global South being generally poor, research suggests it is improving, at least in some regions. For instance, of 172 stories produced by 30 Vietnamese journalists who covered the environment in 2006, not a single one focused on climate change. But a more systematic study<sup>3</sup> of five major Vietnamese newspapers found that last year each paper carried an average of two to three local stories per month on the issue.

Coverage is also on the rise in both Brazil and Mexico, according to researchers at a recent workshop<sup>2</sup> held at

Oxford University, UK. "Climate change and global warming are gradually becoming popular words in Chinese media," adds Min Huang, a researcher at George Mason University in Washington DC who has carried out her own studies on the subject. "There was an admirable collection of about 2300 news stories related to climate change in 2007 in the website of China Climate Change Info-Net." Even so, there are caveats: government-run central newspapers and news agencies that are tightly controlled by the state, such as the *Peoples Daily* and the *Xinhua* news agency, publish many more news stories on global warming than other local media.

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#### COUNTERING CONFUSION

And where coverage has improved, it hasn't necessarily translated into broader public awareness. "There's a real awareness about changes in the climate, but it isn't necessarily construed as 'climate change,'" points out Max Boykoff, an Oxford

researcher who has worked in Honduras. In other words, although rural villagers are keenly attuned to shifting climate patterns, they are often unaware of warming's anthropogenic origins and its likely long-term impacts.

The little polling that has been done in developing countries confirms such ambiguities. A survey commissioned by the BBC World Service<sup>4</sup> reports that solid majorities around the world support action against climate change. But relatively large percentages of respondents have heard little or nothing about the issue in developing countries such as Russia (64 per cent), Egypt (41 per cent), Kenya (53 per cent), Nigeria (49 per cent), Indonesia (65 per cent), and India and Kenya (36 percent each). The numbers are also somewhat skewed because polling in eight of the developing countries took place only in urban areas, where residents are relatively well-educated, and the countries surveyed are among the largest and wealthiest in the global South. Awareness is almost certainly far lower in the least developed countries and among poorer regions in other industrializing states. The few reports that do reach these places usually say little about local impacts and arrive in a language that the vast majority of people can't understand.

Even Boykoff, who has argued<sup>5</sup> that what UK and US audiences need is not more but better reporting, agrees that coverage is simply lacking in developing countries. "More reporting [in the global South] would be helpful, no doubt. People feel saturated about carbon emissions reporting in the UK, but I don't think that's the case in developing countries," he says. "There needs to be more journalism training and access to media coverage on climate change." Some experts are calling for exactly that — more and better coverage in the local media, with the help of donor-assisted training programs. Not only is it hoped this will raise awareness of the issue; it could aid adaptation by helping the public and policymakers factor its growing importance into their everyday decisions.

Several such programs are now up and running. The World Bank-led ComPlus Alliance teamed up with the Reuters Foundation to carry out a workshop for developing-world journalists at last year's Carbon Expo in Germany, and the British Council has been working with China's Science and Technology Department to train Chinese journalists. Internews's Earth Journalism Network has been active in Asia, carrying out training at workshops in the region, while Panos, a media information company with a focus on global development

issues, has done both media research and training on climate change in Africa and the Caribbean<sup>6</sup>.

A couple of these initiatives enabled developing-country journalists to report from the UN conference in Bali last December. Perhaps most ambitiously, Internews, the IIED and Panos came together to form the Climate Change Media Partnership, which brought a total of 37 journalists from 17 developing countries to the summit. There they produced some 660 stories as well as participating in numerous training workshops, seminars, a radio pool for Indonesian journalists, a field trip and a virtual press conference on Second Life. The partnership has also provided additional training for members of its network and will continue activities at least until December 2009, when nations will meet in Copenhagen to agree a global deal on climate change post-2012, when the Kyoto Protocol expires.

Boykoff applauds the Bali support programs as “a great intervention. It’s definitely a good investment to bring journalists to the summits. Articles can be picked up from the wires, but to have voices from developing countries themselves to help translate more effectively the larger processes at work is very important.” But there are legitimate concerns as to whether such training will improve the situation. Some question whether more coverage will actually spur action on climate change<sup>7</sup>, with research to date delivering conflicting results<sup>8,9</sup>. Raising awareness, furthermore, needn’t rely on the media. Many programs targeting youth audiences, for instance, will naturally gravitate to educational activities.

Some also worry that funding for journalists from nongovernmental organizations could skew their coverage. Explains David Dickson, the director of SciDev.Net, a not-for-profit organization that provides news and information about science, technology and the developing world: “In principle, I’m not against journalists accepting financial support

from external organizations. However, it is important that they maintain their journalistic independence, which means writing about issues because they genuinely believe them to be important, not because it is a condition of their support.”

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The methodology of international assistance has also at times come under criticism. “International support has clearly been helpful but it is unsustainable,” says an Asian environmental journalist who asked not to be named. “Many media support projects are ad hoc and not very suitable to local needs.” The IIED’s Shanahan concedes, “There is a tendency for trainers to ‘parachute’ into a country, run a workshop and then disappear again on a plane.” “This approach, [if there is] no follow-up training or long-term capacity building, is far from ideal.”

But the aim of these media development programs is to work long-term with local groups and to nurture professional associations for journalists. In doing so, the organizers hope to train local reporters so they can better understand issues that will be an increasing part of their beat as the climate changes. Above and beyond gaining access to more column inches, the first hurdle will be to ensure quality of reporting. “A huge problem is [that journalists are] failing to make the correct link between climate change and the environmental problems they are

reporting on,” says Hodson, the climate change journalism trainer. “They want to blame all landslides on climate change, for instance, without getting a scientist to comment on the probabilities.”

It then becomes all too easy for local officials to lay blame for disasters on climate change — and the rich nations that have done the most to cause it — rather than their own failings in environmental management. Without access to detailed scientific data and studies — all too rare in such cases — it’s often difficult to pinpoint the real causes of events. Concludes Faleiros, from Brazil: “[The] climate change issue is a pretty good opportunity to change a lot of things in the world, from energy consumption to food distribution. So it’s a good opportunity for the media ... to put sustainable development in the forefront.”

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