



SVEN TORFINN/PANOS PICTURES

POLICY BRIEFING # 3

OCTOBER 2009

Least responsible, most affected, least informed:

public understanding of climate change in Africa

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Introduction

African citizens are least responsible for generating the greenhouse gases that are causing the global climate to change. Yet they are already suffering, and will continue to suffer, some of the most devastating consequences of climate change. This policy briefing, rooted in detailed research carried out across six African countries, argues that African citizens both need and have the right to information on how human-induced climate change will impact on their lives and how they can adapt. It also argues that African citizens have a major role in educating those principally responsible for climate change about its true impact.

African citizens are at humanity's climate change frontline, yet according to this research they are also among the least informed about human-induced global climate change, its causes and its consequences. Broader public understanding of a range of climate change issues is required if Africa is to respond and adapt to climate change. Better public understanding will also be necessary to enable those most affected by climate change to communicate their perspectives and experiences to those most responsible for causing it.

The information flow on climate change to date has principally been from the rest of the world to Africa. It needs to be replaced by a sustained dialogue and two-way flow of information that empowers African citizens and ensures publics and politicians in countries mainly responsible for causing climate change are better informed of African realities and perspectives.

In December 2009, more than 15,000 people will gather at the 15th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) conference known as the Conference of Parties (COP 15) in Copenhagen for what many hope can be a definitive moment in human history: to reach a revised global agreement on tackling climate change by reducing greenhouse gases and providing resources for countries to adapt where possible to the impacts. The degree to which these negotiations are successful is likely to determine how many people will have their lives wrecked or ended by climate change. African citizens are among those who have most at stake at the negotiations.

Throughout 2009 the BBC World Service Trust, with the support of the British Council, has been asking African citizens for their knowledge and perspectives on climate

Front cover image

Teshoma Abera stands in his barren and infertile field. After just two days of rain in the year, his crops have failed dramatically

Below Bayissa Urgessa conducts a focus group with agro-pastoralists, Ethiopia, May 2009



change as part of a broader research and communication initiative, *Africa Talks Climate*. This groundbreaking research has systematically gathered the views of farmers and fishermen, pastoralists and business people, women and men, rich and poor, rural and urban. The findings draw on focus group discussions with more than 1,000 people in Nigeria (pilot), Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda (phase one); and DR Congo, South Africa, Sudan and Tanzania (phase two). This briefing is based on research findings from the first six of these countries. An Executive Summary and 10 country reports from *Africa Talks Climate* will be published separately, and will be available from the *Africa Talks Climate* website (www.africatalksclimate.com).

Summary of policy conclusions

- African **public awareness** of the environment – and particularly of environmental degradation – is strong, principally because environmental issues impact so immediately on the daily lives of African citizens and have done so for many years.
- There is a near universal sense across all the people interviewed – from pastoralists to politicians, fisherfolk to urban commuters – that **the “weather” is changing** (the term “climate” is rarely used, or is used interchangeably with “weather”).
- There is a strong tendency for **Africans to hold themselves individually or collectively responsible** for changes in the environment and the weather which they blame on environmental degradation caused locally. Deforestation, localised pollution, and overpopulation are all factors perceived as causing changes to the weather. Sometimes governments are blamed, sometimes industry or other communities or sectors are blamed, and sometimes factors beyond human control are invoked (especially God). But when considering the idea of human responsibility, Africans hold themselves significantly responsible and accountable for the environmental degradation and changes in the weather they experience.
- There is little awareness that the climatic problems facing Africa – now or in the future – are likely to have **causes that extend beyond their own continent**. African lives will be severely impacted by carbon dioxide emissions generated overwhelmingly by the rest of the world. When this realisation takes hold their response is unpredictable.
- African citizens are **among the least informed** about human-induced global climate change, its causes and its consequences. This lack of information is severely inhibiting the capacity of African citizens both to adapt to climate change, and to exert influence both internationally and on their own governments to ensure an appropriate and urgent response to the scale of the threat they face.
- Once **public understanding of the severity of climate change impact develops**, and awareness increases that international factors beyond their control are responsible, a rational response may well be one of anger directed at those responsible.
- A **window of opportunity** exists for the international community to persuade African citizens that the rest of the world is serious about mitigating the worst of the devastating potential impacts of climate change on the continent. If that window is closed, blame, recrimination – and possibly despair – may become major additional factors complicating meaningful action on environmental degradation and climate change in Africa.
- There is a trend for some African citizens to attribute weather changes (in part or in full) to **God, gods or fate**. The potential role of religious and faith leaders in informing and catalysing responses to climate change would appear to be substantial.
- It has taken western publics and politicians more than 20 years (some would argue much longer) to begin to develop the political response to the climate crisis which the evidence warrants. Environmental issues, however, tend to impact far more urgently on people's lives in the countries in which this research was conducted, and **the potential may exist for African political and public opinion to leapfrog** the tortuous evolution of western public (and perhaps political) responses to climate change.
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) places Africa at special risk from climate change, in part because of its lack of capacity to adapt to changing environmental realities. Sufficient support to enable African governments and citizens to adapt to climate change will be a key ingredient of any successful international treaty. A major policy conclusion of this report is that **meeting the information and communication needs of African citizens** should be considered as a critical component of adaptation strategies around climate change.
- Providing African citizens with the information they need to respond and adapt to climate change is just one component of probable forthcoming debates around climate change in Africa. **A central issue is one of environmental justice**. African citizens will be among the most affected by climate change but are least responsible for the greenhouse gases that have caused it. They cannot make just demands on the rest of the world, or determine properly their own political and other responses to this emerging crisis, without being informed about its causes and its consequences. African citizens need better information on climate change, but they also need far better ways of communicating their reality and perceptions on the issue to those principally responsible for causing it.
- The media in Africa, together with schools, are critical sources of information on climate change. More concerted, better organised and researched **information and communication efforts will be essential** if African citizens are to have the capacity and opportunity to respond effectively to climate change. It is hoped that this policy briefing, and the broader research initiative on which it rests, will constitute a useful contribution to such efforts.

The main findings of this briefing are summarised in the points above. The remainder falls into three parts:

The first provides some background placing current public understanding of climate change in a historical context.

The second outlines how Africa is least responsible, most affected and least informed about climate change.

The third draws some conclusions and implications for the Copenhagen summit and other international policy debates from the research.

“The information flow on climate change to date has principally been from the rest of the world to Africa. This needs to be replaced by a sustained dialogue that empowers African citizens”



Horse cart drivers transport goods and passengers through deep flood waters in Sicap Mbao, Dakar, Senegal, September 2009

¹ Earthscan/International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) (1985), Lloyd Timberlake, *Africa in Crisis: the causes, the cures of environmental bankruptcy*

² Club du Sahel/CILSS, (September 1981) “*The Sahel Drought Control and Development Programme, 1975 – 1979*” put the figure at around 50,000 – 100,000. The UN Conference on Desertification (1977) estimated as many as 150,000 had died.

³ See for example, Earthscan (1982), Alan Grainger, *Desertification: How people make deserts, how they can stop and why they don't*.

Environmental degradation in Africa

This briefing seeks to focus specifically on climate change, rather than the environment. Yet a major challenge for the research on which it is based was extricating insight into the issue of climate change from more generalised public perspectives on the environmental problems facing Africa.

This is unsurprising. The externally generated impacts of climate change already affecting Africa take place against a backdrop of long-standing internally generated natural resource degradation.

Acute environmental degradation in Africa is not a recent phenomenon and is a product of years of abuse of natural resources reaching back to the colonial era. It was already a focus of significant research and analysis more than a quarter of a century ago. Africa's environmental capital has already suffered major withdrawals over recent decades and was in many areas overdrawn years ago.

The 1984-5 Ethiopian famine claimed the lives of up to one million people. It was attributed not only to drought, misgovernance and a lack of aid, but to “environmental bankruptcy” caused by years of deforestation, soil erosion and overexploitation of other natural resources¹.

“Africa has taken too much from its land”, argued a 1985 report from Earthscan/International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). “It has overdrawn its environmental accounts and the result for much of Africa has been environmental bankruptcy. The big farm schemes of the Northern experts, and the small efforts to stay alive of the rapidly growing rural populations have overcultivated, overgrazed and deforested the soil”, it concluded.

More than a decade earlier, the appalling droughts that afflicted the Sahel from 1968–72, killing between 50,000 and 250,000 people² (contemporary estimates varied greatly) and millions of animals, were triggered by a lack of rain. Whether drought was an early symptom of climate change or of natural climatic variation is a subject of scientific dispute. Its effects, however, were greatly exacerbated by human activity. According to most of the research at the time, drought was not principally responsible for people dying – it was overcultivation and overgrazing of the land that left no margin when drought arrived.³

Sometimes environmental degradation has prompted acute crises by triggering floods, droughts and famines. Sometimes it has been chronic in nature, taking the form of water and air pollution, uncollected rubbish or open sewers. It has resulted from poor governance, overpopulation, an inequitable international trading system and – as

was the case in South Africa during Apartheid – from naked racial injustice forcing too many people onto too little land in the interests of a small minority.

Ultimately however, pre-existing, long-standing and increasingly devastating environmental degradation provides the backdrop to the relatively recent narrative of climate change in Africa. Substantial governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental efforts have been made to address such degradation internationally dating back at least to the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, and the follow-up Earth Summits in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002.

Climate change is an increasing and intensifying factor potentially threatening the habitability of significant parts of Africa. It needs to be viewed against a backdrop of serious ongoing environmental degradation reaching back several decades.

Our research suggests that this is how many African citizens regard it – not least because they experience the direct impact of environmental degradation on their lives day in and day out.

Does it matter that people know about climate change?

An assumption might be made that African citizens have far more urgent issues to worry about than their environment or climate change. In fact, much of our research suggests that people are deeply concerned about their changing environment. In general, the poorer people are, the more they understand just how vulnerable they are to shifts in the life support systems that sustain them, and how poorly protected they are from the extreme consequences of a change in climate.

The potential appears to exist to translate this intense sense of environmental awareness fostered by vulnerability to environmental change into a broader concern around human-induced climate change. If this is the case, why and how does it matter that citizens have better access to information on climate change?

People who are severely impacted by climate change will be better able to adapt if they are informed about the issue. Farmers need to change the varieties of the seeds they plant, the crops they grow and the times they sow and reap. Water and other resources need to be husbanded far more carefully, floods and droughts to be anticipated and planned for, livelihoods and businesses need to change and adapt. Significant planning and resources are already beginning to be spent on adapting to climate change in Africa, but these will need to be greatly scaled up in future.

The experience of the industrialised world is that political and public action on climate change takes many years, arguably many decades, to translate scientific understanding of the issue to a stage where meaningful action is contemplated. It has taken politicians and publics this long in industrialised countries, despite multi-million dollar research centres, highly sophisticated media and communication infrastructures, high standards of education and rich reservoirs of civic and political action. The prospects for serious political and public action in Africa might therefore seem bleak. This is all the more the case given the many other pressing calls upon the time, money and resources of the most affected populations and their governments.

Many of the findings of our research imply the opposite. The acute impact of environmental change on the lives of African citizens suggest that there is already a far more urgent interest in these issues than there is in other parts of the world, especially the west. There appears to be a clear demand for information that enables people to adapt to environmental change, particularly if it gives people realistic options of how to do so.

There is much less apparent demand for information on the causes of those changes. This is largely because there is little notion of where that responsibility principally lies.

“There appears to be a clear demand for information that enables people to adapt to environmental change”

Bayissa Urgessa interviews agro-pastoralist, Ethiopia, May 2009

Least responsible, most affected, least informed

Least responsible: “If all countries were to pollute so little, there would be no climate change”

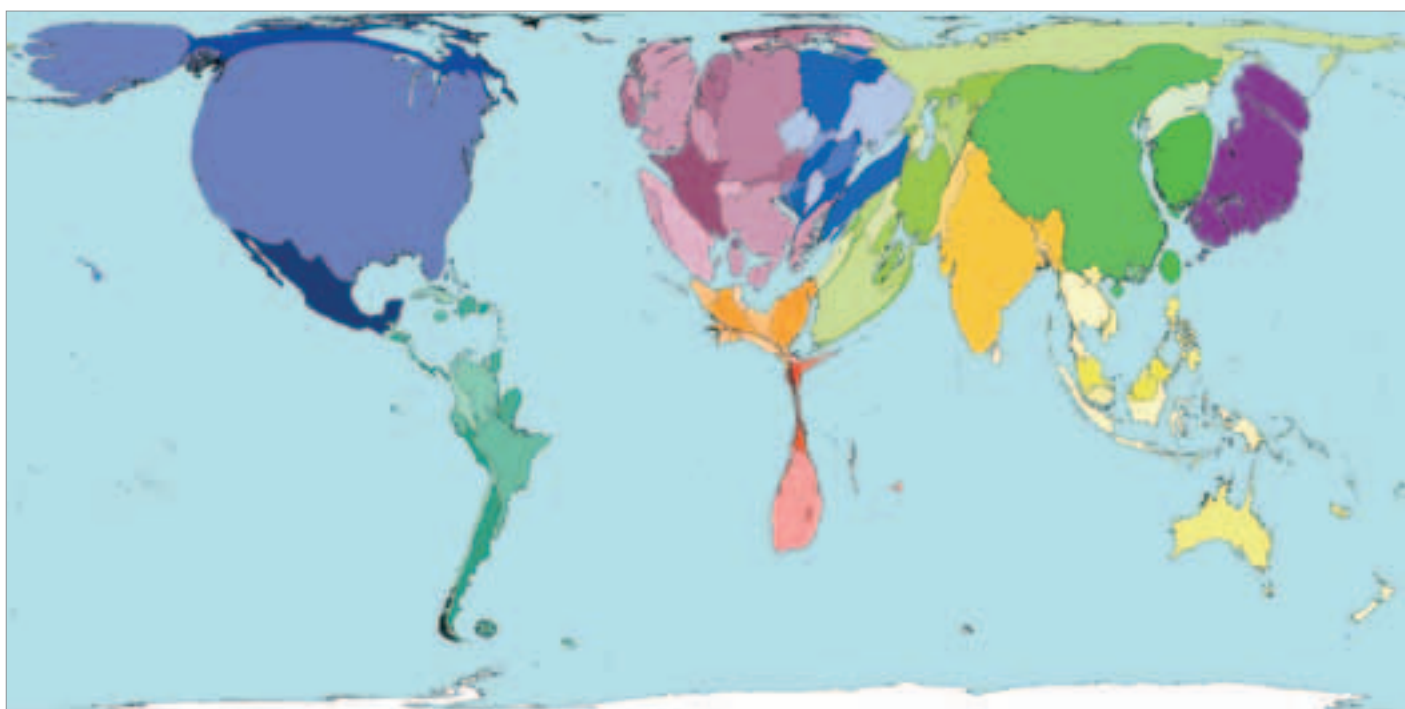
Thirty out of the 40 lowest per capita emitters of carbon dioxide in the world are African countries. The 50 least developed countries in the world – the majority African – contribute less than 1% of global carbon emissions. A 2009 report from the Global Humanitarian Forum, chaired by Kofi Annan, states: “The top 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change in 2004, 15 of which

are in Africa, collectively emitted less than 0.7% of total carbon emissions ... Altogether, African countries emitted only 4% of all carbon – 2.6% if South Africa is excluded.”⁴

“If all countries were to pollute so little, there would be no climate change”, it continues.

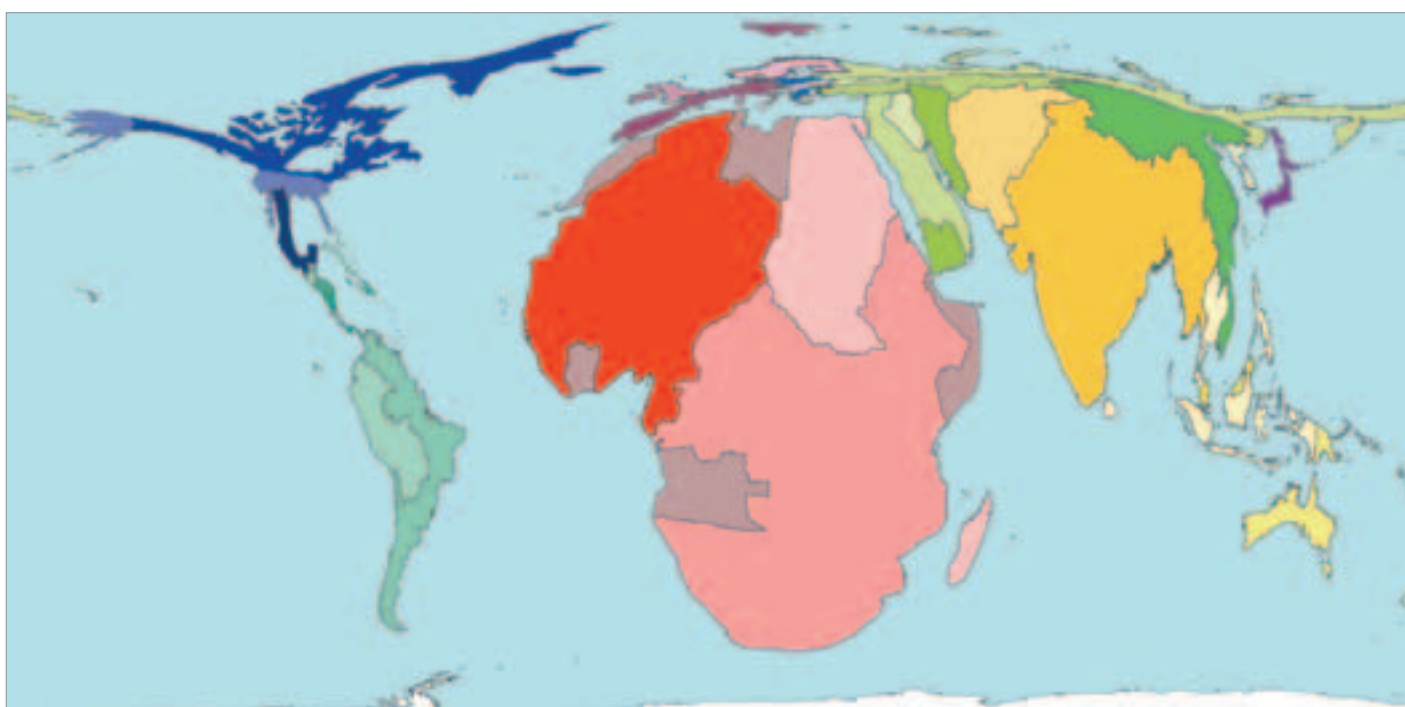
Figure 1 (below, top), taken from the report, illustrates graphically just how little responsibility Africa historically bears for the climate change which will affect it. Figure 2 (below, bottom) further shows the disproportionate degree to which African nations suffer from health burdens related to climate change.

4
Global Humanitarian
Forum (2009) Human
Impact Report:
Climate Change,
*The Anatomy of a Silent
Crisis*, introduction by
Kofi Annan



Above Figure 1: World map reflecting carbon emissions

(Annual aggregate national carbon emissions 2000) © Copyright 2006 SASI Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan). Reproduced in *Anatomy of a Silent Crisis*, Global Humanitarian Forum 2009



Above Figure 2: World map reflecting mortality related to climate change

Source: Climate Change and Global Health: Quantifying a Growing Ethical Crisis, 2007, Jonathan A. Patz, Holly K. Gibbs, Jonathan A. Foley, Jamesine V. Rogers, and Kirk R. Smith reproduced in *Anatomy of a Silent Crisis*, Global Humanitarian Forum 2009

Key impacts

Agriculture and food security

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), by 2020, yields from rain-fed agriculture could be reduced by up to 50% in some African countries. Food prices, which have already risen in recent years (due to a range of economic, environmental and other factors) and are having devastating effects on people living in poverty in many African countries, can be expected to increase further.

In 2008, extreme drought in Uganda, where more than 80% of the population depend on rain-fed subsistence farming, reduced agricultural output by as much as 30%, according to the Global Humanitarian Forum. In late 2009, extreme drought is wreaking havoc in Kenya, leaving four million people dependent on food aid.

Food aid and other food imports may also become scarcer as major predicted impacts of climate change materialise. The mid-west United States, one of the main grain producing areas in the world and the source of substantial current food aid, is also expected to be heavily affected by climate change.

Water: too little and too much

Climate change makes the hydrological cycle which drives our weather patterns more powerful. Droughts become more intense and more frequent. So do floods. Rainfall patterns in many parts of Africa have already changed markedly.

“Rainfall has decreased by 4% on average each decade since the 1970s in western Africa, and 2.4% per decade in tropical rainforest regions”, says the Global Humanitarian Forum. “Complicating the picture, in some dry areas like Morocco, seasonal rain showers will likely become more intense, which can produce unusually severe and damaging flooding.”

The IPCC predicts that “by the 2080s, many millions more people than today are projected to experience floods every year due to sea level rise. The numbers affected will be largest in the densely populated and low-lying megadeltas of Asia and Africa while small islands are especially vulnerable”.

Health: climate change has already had an impact

Africans are already dying as a result of climate change. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that at the turn of the millennium, 2% of all diarrhoeal disease-related deaths and deaths from malaria and malnutrition worldwide could be attributed to climate change, the vast majority of them in Africa.

The prospects for the future are much graver, however. Up to 80 million more people will be exposed to malaria in Africa if warming extends to 4 degrees for example. Malnutrition is expected by the IPCC to become more common, and declining crop yields are likely to leave “hundreds of millions without the ability to produce or purchase sufficient food, particularly in Africa”.

Conflict and Instability

The causes of conflict in Africa, as elsewhere, are complex and various but, as elsewhere, a principal driver of conflict is over control of resources.

Environmental degradation causes resource scarcity, reducing the supply of usually renewable resources of food and fresh water, and non-renewable resources such as land.

The links between environmental degradation and increased political tension and conflict have been highlighted for many years: “In the complex web of causes leading to social and political instability, bloodshed and war, environmental degradation is playing an increasingly important role - this is the ‘Greenwar factor’”, argued a 1991 report from the Panos Institute, *Greenwar: environment and conflict*.

Climate change is, however, predicted to greatly exacerbate conflict in Africa and is, in some cases, already doing so. Examples of climate change-related conflicts already happening provided by the Global Humanitarian Forum include “fighting between pastoralists and farmers in the Oromia and Ogaden regions of Ethiopia, inter-clan fighting in Somalia, and increased fighting during drought periods in Nigeria”.

It is worth noting however, that the capacity for large-scale conflict caused by environmental degradation has been highlighted over many years and has not so far materialised to the extent predicted. In 1985, Egypt's then Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (and later United Nations Secretary General) Dr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, warned that “the next war in our region will be over the waters of the Nile, not politics”. Conflict over water resources has been a particular fear but there are longstanding examples – such as around sharing water reserves of the River Nile – where peaceful negotiation and cooperation have so far succeeded.

Poverty: the cruellest irony

It is a cruel irony that the countries that will be most affected by climate change are those where people are in the worst position to adapt to it. The Global Humanitarian Forum has focused its analysis particularly on the human impact of climate change and concludes that “because the poor tend to live in geographical and climatic regions that are naturally most vulnerable to climate change, their capacity to adapt is easily overwhelmed by the impact of the changing conditions. They have the fewest assets to rely on in the event of a shock – whether it be a weather related disaster, a bad harvest or a family member falling ill”.

The same report argues that more than ten million people worldwide have fallen into poverty today because of climate change.

What good news?

Not all the climate change-related impacts on Africa will be negative. Climate change is projected to bring some benefits in temperate areas, such as fewer deaths from cold exposure, and some mixed effects such as changes in range and transmission potential of malaria in Africa. Heavier concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere helps plants grow, so it is possible that the many negative agricultural impacts will be partially offset by some increased fertility.

Unfortunately, very few scientists believe that such factors will significantly outweigh the dramatic negative effects of the expected climate change impacts on Africa.

“It is a cruel irony that the countries that will be most affected by climate change are those where people are in the worst position to adapt to it”

“People are intensely environmentally aware and perceive an increasing and deeply disturbing deterioration in their environment”

Most affected: how climate change will impact Africa
Africa, together with the Arctic and some parts of Asia, will be among the regions most impacted by climate change in the world, according to scientific consensus. It is especially vulnerable because of “low adaptive capacity and projected climate change impacts, and because its megadeltas – such as the Niger delta – have “large populations and high exposure to sea level rise, storm surges and river flooding.”⁵

The science of climate change makes grim reading. Dr Rajendra Pachauri, Nobel Prize-winning chair of the IPCC argues that a 2 degree Celsius rise in global temperatures by 2050 is inevitable even if humanity emits no further emissions of carbon dioxide, the main gas driving climate change.

According to the Global Humanitarian Forum, “more than one third of the world’s population are physically vulnerable to climate change ... people living in low-lying areas, the semi-arid land belt along the Sahel that separates Africa’s arid north from more fertile areas, easily flooded regions on the Equator, and glacier regions are most likely to be affected.” The same report argues that sub-Saharan Africa is at the

most immediate risk of climate change-induced floods and droughts.

Several of the most respected climate change scientists have become progressively more pessimistic in recent years and months and believe that climate change is happening “faster than many people thought possible.”⁶ Most continue to believe that, providing tough and binding commitments are reached to rapidly reduce global emissions, it will be possible to stave off global temperature increases beyond 2 degrees (an increase which in itself will have disastrous consequences for some places). If an agreement is not reached soon to limit carbon dioxide emissions, increases of 4 degrees and more become likely. At its worst, such a scenario would see large parts of Africa become uninhabitable.

Least informed: how citizens in Africa perceive climate change

“A set of exploratory studies and mental model interviews were conducted in order to characterise public understanding of climate change ... [people tended] to confuse stratospheric ozone depletion with the greenhouse effect and weather with climate ... Additionally, the ‘greenhouse effect’ was often interpreted literally as the cause of a hot and steamy climate”

*“What do people know about climate change?”
Journal of Risk Analysis USA, Vol 14 No 6, 1994*

The quote above reflects the state of public understanding of climate change in the United States in the 1990s. The limited research carried out on this issue in other countries has tended to reflect similar findings, dependent on how much the issue has been a policy or media priority. It has been neither in Africa over recent years.

The research was designed to explore public understanding and perspectives of climate change in Africa. Africa is a continent of 52 distinct, highly diverse countries, and the research on which this is based took place in only six of them (research in a further four countries is underway). Some caution needs to be exercised therefore in drawing universal conclusions across the continent.

The different countries were chosen to reflect a range of regions, cultures and experiences. Research participants ranged from rural pastoralists through to cabinet ministers, urban town dwellers through to fisherfolk.

In each country, fieldwork locations were selected in consultation with a national advisory network to represent areas experiencing environmental challenges which have been linked to, or are predicted to be, exacerbated by climate change. Geographic, ethnic, linguistic and urban/rural diversity were also considered. The citizen focus groups were single sex, and involved approximately eight people. Participants in each focus group were of a similar age and socio-economic class or profession. Moderators were of the same gender and spoke the same language as the participants. For the opinion formers, one-to-one interviews were conducted with policy-makers, religious leaders, business people, journalists and civil society leaders.

In each case, verbatim local language and English transcripts were produced for each focus group and interview. These were systematically coded by a team of international researchers using a common list of codes to group and cluster the data. Codes were then analysed to identify the insights and emerging themes. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases and was carried out between May and October 2009.

Public action and engagement with climate change in Africa at the civil society and governmental level has increased markedly in recent years and months. This briefing, however, focuses explicitly on broader public understanding of the issue rather than on civil society and political action. It draws principally on research from the focus groups rather than one-to-one interviews. Conclusions reached were drawn from research from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and Uganda.

Main findings

Intense environmental awareness

People are intensely environmentally aware and perceive an increasing and deeply disturbing deterioration in their environment. Environmental degradation is seen as an issue of personal and often profound individual impact. Farmers see their crops failing through increased temperatures, drought and flood, urban dwellers experience increased pollution, garbage and sewage problems, fisherpeople report declining fish catches. No-one who participated in this research considers the environment as unimportant. Almost all see it as something that deeply affects their own circumstance.

Much environmental degradation is a result of soil erosion, overfishing, deforestation and other non climate-related factors and there is a keen understanding of this:

“The changes in the air and the soil erosion in the mountains have made it difficult to grow trees, they just dry up as soon as we plant them.”

Male farmer, Amhara, north western Ethiopia

“Even our fathers were fishermen – we are following in their footsteps, but nowadays you go fishing and just come back with a small catch. But when we were young, when we went with them, it was a catch that Jesus used (laugh) long long ago – but nowadays you find that the waters of Lake Victoria have gone down a long way.”

Fisherman, Ahero, western Kenya

“You find that due to cutting down of trees there is soil erosion which ends up carrying away the fertile soil. Also the

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Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2007), Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) *Climate Change 2007* (p. 52)

6

Hans Joachim Schellnhuber — Founding Director, Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK); Member, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) quoted in Global Humanitarian Forum (2009) *Human Impact Report: Climate Change, The Anatomy of a Silent Crisis*

forest contributes to bringing the rainfall and you find that people are cutting down trees and you will automatically start seeing the land changing because there have been no rains.”
Male, Nairobi, Kenya

The weather is changing

A universal reflection across all people interviewed in all countries participating in this research is a perception that their weather patterns are changing. Droughts are perceived as happening more frequently and with greater intensity. Food is becoming less reliably available and more expensive, a factor which people associate with changes in the weather. This perspective is generally epitomised by a sense that the seasons are no longer predictable:

“Our weather has changed a lot. Before you could know and predict when the rain will start and when it will stop... now it is uncertain.”

Male, Lagos, Nigeria

“We lost our cattle due to drought. I sold some of them and the rest are dead due to the long winter and lack of rain.”
Male agro-pastoralist, Oromia, southern Ethiopia

“...Ten years ago we are not in this place. We migrated from one village near Niger, because of shortage of food to feed ourselves and our animals, our animals are dying, no water, everywhere is dry that is the reason why we migrated from our place to settle here”

Herdsmen, Jigawa, northern Nigeria

“On the road leading to Bignona the mangrove used to be dense, but now it has completely disappeared, probably due to the lack of rain.”

Male, Ziguinchor, south western Senegal

“We have not had enough rain for the last four years and the animals we have get little or no grass. They begin to get diseases that are related to famine and die.”

Female pastoralist, Isiolo, central Kenya

Environmental degradation is seen as having overwhelmingly local causes

The causes of these changes are considered to be largely local, and specifically climate-related changes (which are described as changes in the weather) are not distinguished from broader environmental changes.

Crucially, changes in the weather, such as decreasing rainfall or floods, are blamed overwhelmingly on local factors such as pollution and – above all – deforestation. The association between the weather and trees – and the felling of them – is pronounced across all the research in all the countries.

African citizens interviewed for this research largely lay the blame for their environmental problems at their own door. Sometimes they blame their own behaviours, sometimes that of other communities or sectors or businesses.

There is extremely limited understanding that some of the changes to their weather or climate may have causes beyond their own experience or country. The notion that international pollution and other external factors may now or in the future be partly or increasingly responsible for drought, floods or other climate-related problems in Africa is barely reflected in the research:

“A lot of problems happened due to that deforestation. For example, there was rain before, but now after the deforestation, the rain became scarce. Then drought happened.”

Male agro-pastoralist, Oromia, southern Ethiopia



SAM OTIENO / BBC WST

“Earthly things have changed, and it is because we have started cutting down trees everywhere. Now strong winds come and take our things away, and the rain too does not come regularly.”

Female, Jirapa, south western Ghana

“Toxins [affect the environment]. In Kampala we have cars, industries, so the air in Kampala is not fresh, the vegetation is not natural.”

Male, Kampala, Uganda

“The forest coverage has decreased. The weather has changed and there is an increase in temperature. When we were young there was plenty of rain and more trees.”

Female, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Some implications of this key finding are outlined in the last section of this briefing.

Issues of governance

There is also a significant association of environmental degradation with either poor governance or absence of governance, and few expect any environmental issues to be addressed – climate related or not – without substantial improvements in political governance.

“There is a structural problem in Africa”, argues one senior African media figure also interviewed as part of the research. “You cannot see the impact of climate change in isolation from the political systems that are prevailing in Africa. To combat climate change, it needs democracy; it needs peace; it needs government committed to socio-economic transformation; a government committed to exploit the potentials in Africa”.

Expectations of government responsiveness tend to vary – as might be expected – greatly between countries, but also between rural (where there are often low expectations of government action) and urban (where demand for government action was often higher):

“The water problem is brought about by our leadership starting from those at the helm. The president is the one who should be solving our problems and he should empower those below him to come and assist us to solve the problem of water. Our lives have been destroyed because of lack of water. Our cattle are dying because of lack of water. When there was water in the river, life was very good and even when there was drought, cattle always had grass that grew at the river banks.”

Female pastoralist, Isiolo, central Kenya

Above Patrick Maina moderates focus group discussion, Isiolo, central Kenya

“You cannot see the impact of climate change in isolation from the political systems that are prevailing in Africa”

The will of God?

While the principal perception is that changes to the weather were caused by local factors and local behaviours, another dominant response is that God – or gods, fate or other such factors – are responsible for such changes. When changes in the climate are attributed to external factors, these tend to be focused on issues of God, faith and fate. Another theme is that mankind has damaged the nature given to them by God.

Such perceptions tend to be specific to some countries and localities and not to others, but to the extent that these perceptions do exist, the finding suggests a strong potential role of faith leaders in generating greater knowledge, understanding and action around climate change:

“It looks as if God has changed his calendar.”

Male, Accra, Ghana

“The secret is with Allah. Allah brings the rain. The one who causes the drought, who sends us the drought is Allah.”

Female pastoralist, Afar, north eastern Ethiopia

“The changes [in rainfall] is nature, human beings can't cause it. We are in the rainy season so it can rain at anytime. If we are in November/December and it rains then we can say that our sins caused it. We have not sinned enough for God to destroy the world with rain because he has promised not to destroy the earth with rain again but he can use fire”.

Female farmer, Rivers State, south eastern Nigeria

The challenge of language

A major purpose of the research on which this briefing is based was to explore what information African citizens need if they are to respond to and adapt to climate change. The results suggest that a central challenge in such responses will revolve around language, something that is reaffirmed by African journalists⁷.

“We don't have a term to describe climate change in our language”, says Claudie Tshela, General Manager of TV Programmes at the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation⁸. “We have many words for particular weather conditions – such as wind – but it takes us at least four times as long to describe an issue of climate as it would in English ... it means it can be quite boring for the listener”.

The research reflects this. The term ‘climate’ is not generally recognised across the range of countries and people involved in the research. The term ‘climate change’ is little known and people frequently interpret it to mean changes in the weather. The term ‘global warming’ is more widely recognised, either because it has been taught in schools or, more commonly, because people have heard about it from the media (television, radio, magazine and mobile telephones are all mentioned). However ‘global warming’ is often inaccurately conflated with phenomena such as the ozone layer or tectonic movements and earthquakes or other largely unrelated issues.

African governments and citizens are currently in a position where they are largely reactive, rather than proactive in their responses to climate change. Nearly all the science

providing insight into what is likely to happen to their societies and environmental life support systems is carried out by research centres outside of Africa. Nearly all the measures proposed to address international climate change are devised and debated at international fora which – at least until very recently – have barely been reported in Africa, and are conducted in language unlikely to resonate with the vast majority of people on the continent.

There are greater numbers of urgent life-threatening crises claiming the attention of African citizens and politicians alike than anywhere else in the world, and weaker capacities to address all of them. Civil society in Africa is increasingly strong and focused on the issue, but climate change is being debated more on Africa's behalf rather than by and within Africa itself.

An important repercussion of this is that a problem that will affect Africa more than any other continent is being framed in language and terms that are largely divorced from African reality.

“Climate change is an esoteric and initially confusing concept to many”, argues Saleemul Huq of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). “Communication about it must use a community's own language and terms they can understand. This means not only translating scientific texts into local languages but also giving up on the written word altogether and using traditional means of communication such as art and theatre, or modern methods such as video.”⁹ The research on which this briefing is based supports such claims.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic may provide some useful lessons. HIV was identified, highlighted and conceptualised in early policy responses in the west in the 1980s. Its effects were most acute in Africa (and other developing countries) but the language and communication methods were generated by experts from outside of the continent. Much of the early media reporting of the issue in Africa focused on highly scientific language which provided little insight into the already apparent reality of the disease on the continent. For many years, much of the early debates around HIV/AIDS were conducted in terms that were technical in nature and often untranslatable into terms or languages that were capable of resonating with those most affected.

Mass education campaigns were carried out (and still are) and the best ones provided life-saving information to millions. However, the real sea change in Africa's response to HIV/AIDS came when those most affected by the virus exposed the true reality of the impact – social and economic as well as medical – on their lives, and demanded access to treatment and resources. It was the increasingly vocal, sophisticated and organised response from African civil society that transformed international public and policy responses to the pandemic. African citizens became the agents of change, not the subjects. The same may well prove true of climate change:

“The media talks about development; it doesn't give us much information on the environment.”

Male ago-pastoralist, Oromia, southern Ethiopia

“The media should bring us programmes of places that have been in similar situations, and show the way they handled the issues.”

Female farmer, Ahero, western Kenya

“On TV and Radio, I have heard about temperature increasing in some countries and decreasing in others.”

Female, Afar, north eastern Ethiopia

7 Less than half (47%) of journalists interviewed in a recent study of 400 media practitioners across 20 countries in Africa claimed to be knowledgeable about climate change. From research conducted by the BBC World Service Trust's Research and Learning Group on behalf of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) summer 2009

8 Speaking at UNESCO International Conference on Broadcast Media and Climate Change: A Public Service Remit, Paris (4-5 September 2009)

9 International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) briefing Community Based Adaptation, Saleemul Huq www.iied.org/climate-change/key-issues/community-based-adaptation/community-based-adaptation-iied-briefing

Copenhagen: A closing window of opportunity

This research provides us with some insights into the information and communication needs, realities and aspirations of African citizens confronting yet another massive shock to a continent already reeling from multiple concurrent crises.

An obvious conclusion is that there is a need for greater education about climate change in Africa if its citizens are to adapt to it. As a British organisation operating from the home of the industrial revolution, however, we offer a more fundamental conclusion. Without better public understanding in Africa of the causes and consequences of climate change, those most affected by the impacts of climate change cannot hold those who caused it to their commitments and responsibilities in confronting it.

The extent to which current shifts in the weather or experience of environmental degradation – to which most people were responding – can be attributed to climate change is a matter of scientific and political debate and clearly depends on local context. There is almost no serious scientific doubt that now, and in the future, international carbon and other greenhouse gas pollution will increasingly drive climatic changes, further cause environmental degradation and undermine human development on the African continent.

The research carried out over recent months by the BBC World Service Trust Research and Learning Group reveals little attribution of blame by African publics for their growing climate-related problems on the industrialised world. There is a strong sense that environmental degradation is a localised issue for which responsibility lies with Africans themselves – as governments, individuals and communities – to redress. Even where environmental problems are climatically related, this is frequently attributed to highly visible, localised factors such as deforestation.

There is an obvious irony here. Those international behaviours which may have the most profoundly damaging effects on Africa in the future are those which Africans are least aware of.

This will almost certainly change in the future. As climate-related problems become more marked, and as government, civil society and media attention increases,

the public will become both better informed and more demanding about its causes.

The international community has a window of opportunity to demonstrate to African citizens that it is serious about slowing and ultimately stopping climate change. If it grasps that opportunity – most importantly at the UN summit in December 2009 – the inevitable public attribution of blame for climate change may at least be channelled into constructive responses.

If that window closes and if the international community fails to take serious action on climate change, the long-term public response in Africa could be unpredictable. Clearly however, the likelihood is that a set of problems which African citizens currently consider to be largely their responsibility to address will be transformed into a realisation that little local action is likely to succeed without global action. Without such global action, people may decide that taking any action at all is pointless, and blame and recrimination may increasingly dominate public responses.

There is another window of opportunity that may also be suggested by this research. The intense environmental awareness affirmed by the research suggests there is a reservoir of public demand for more serious efforts to tackle the environmental crises and problems facing Africa.

The issue could become a catalyst for far more concerted governmental and public action on the environment. A reinvigoration of efforts to reverse environmental degradation in Africa seems possible if credible steps are taken internationally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and if industrialised countries commit credible resources to enable countries most affected to adapt to climate change. This only seems feasible, however, against a backdrop of clear international commitments to stem global climate emissions.

Meaningful action on climate change will require unprecedented international cooperation and political will. It will require profound behavioural, economic and social change across nearly all sections of society in nearly all societies. The demands on financial and human resources will be acute. This briefing suggests that the information and communication needs of those most affected by climate change should be a more prominent priority in the international response to climate change. Unless they are met, African citizens cannot adapt to climate change. Nor can they educate those who have the greatest responsibility for slowing it.

“Those international behaviours which may have the most profoundly damaging effects on Africa in the future are those which Africans are least aware of”

Acknowledgments

This briefing is based on research carried out by the BBC World Service Trust Research and Learning Group in partnership with the British Council. Researchers were Apune Jacob Alfred, Selam Ayalew, Miriam Burton, Anna Godfrey (Research Manager), Mercy Kimaro, Perest Kujang, Emily LeRoux-Rutledge, Leah Matthews, Tunga Mbia, Patrick McCurdy, Anu Mohammed, David Musiime, Lucy Neville, Allan Oniba Alana, Sam Otieno, Ed Pauker, Ruman Ronald Moi, and Kayshinee Rye Ramchurn. Substantial input into this briefing was provided by Miriam Burton, Grace Davies, Anna Godfrey, Emily LeRoux-Rutledge and Ed Pauker. Invaluable comments on the text were provided by Kit Vaughan, Caroline Nursey and Gerry Power. The briefing was written by James Deane, head of policy at the BBC World Service Trust who is responsible for any errors.

This policy briefing is one of a series published by the BBC World Service Trust's Policy and Research Programme with funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID). None of the views reflected here should be taken as reflecting those of any funding organisation. The BBC World Service Trust is an independent charity established by the BBC, but no views expressed here should be taken to reflect those of the BBC.

Africa Talks Climate is a groundbreaking, African-led research and communication initiative exploring the public understanding of climate change in Africa. Further information, and all *Africa Talks Climate* publications including an Executive Summary are available from www.africatalksclimate.com



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The BBC World Service Trust is an independent charity funded by external grants and voluntary contributions, mainly from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the European Union, UN agencies and charitable foundations. Registered charity number: 1076235
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