

**Contribution by Fredrick Mugira, Coordinator Water Journalists Africa During The
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Forum**

For the aims of this statement to be met, there is a need for establishing a practical link between the water users, development practitioners, researchers, policy makers, water professionals and capacity development specialists. Journalists are better placed to this role.

But water stories remain inadequate in most media even though coverage of water issues on has increased over the last decade.

Africa's Situation

Water stories remain insufficient in Africa's media. There are few stories about water in Africa's media which are again buried deep inside most newspapers.

It is not common for water stories to attract the public's attention the way political and sports stories do unless such stories are controversial or negative.

Journalists, media managers and media owners claim, reporting on water issues and environment in general needs a lot of money which some private media companies on the continent lack. This is compounded by the political and sports interests that shape the media coverage on the continent. Other reasons advanced to this are that such issues are often complex and boring.

Water issues are multi-faceted. They actually stretch to issues of science, business, economics, culture, health amongst several others. Therefore, good water reporting requires flexible minds that can readily understand these issues; how they interweave and how to simplify them for a common person.

In many cases water reporting in Africa is mainly superficial interpretation of water issues and the stories are full of jargons. I attribute this to a silent rejection of journalists and their editors to style up when it comes to reporting on these issues.

Corruption in some African countries is breeding lack of transparency in the water sector. In the end, officials in such sector refuse to share information with journalists because they fear acting in open manner. They conceal information and refer journalists here and there causing some journalists to find difficulty in verifying information; relying on a single source and in the extreme cases giving up such stories. Relatedly, some corruption officials in the water sector give 'brown envelopes' to journalists so that they keep off stories and do not hold them accountable of their wrong actions.

These problems are further compounded by the political interests that shape the media coverage in Africa. In some African countries, the media are still strongly influenced by governments. Journalists are compelled to serve interests of governments in power which is wrong. Why? Because the role of journalists should go beyond what governments; NGOs or individuals like or dislike. Journalists should remain responsive to the interests of their audience.

Critically related to this is the fact that some media on the continent are increasingly focusing on manipulating opinion, shaping public discourse, and promoting the consumption of products. This is therefore shaping the content of media on the continent to focus mostly on the sections of society that have disposable incomes and leaving out stories of rural, poor and otherwise marginalized people such as those on water.

Inadequacy in covering water stories in Africa could also be related to lack of exposure to concepts in water systems among journalists. Related to this, water journalism is often not seen as a priority which influences the nature and amount of media coverage given to water issues. Perhaps Journalists should take some degree of specialization in water issues.

Journalists and media houses in general lack enough equipment for effective reporting on water. They lack financial resources to fund training of journalists and editors and tackling stories in remote areas where most stories of this nature are.

Recommendations

To increase media coverage of water issues on the African continent, I believe there is need to:

- Increase the number of reporters and journalists who are trained to specialize in covering water issues.
- Create simple water language that is accepted internationally to help break the water jargons.
- Governments, NGOs and private organizations should support journalists to further train in water journalism and communication so as to become experts in this field. They can also support media houses acquire enough equipment for effective reporting on water.
- Editors and media managers should come up with a policy of publishing or airing a given number of water stories per news bulletin or newspaper issue.

Fredrick Mugira Bio

Fredrick Mugira is an a multiple award-winning journalist with over 13 years of wide-ranging experience working in Uganda, pan-African and international media, and over five years' experience in the training of journalists. His journalism career has concentrate on investigating and reporting stories on rural WASH issues. Mugira has both a Master's Degree and Post-Masters Certificate in Communication from Malmo University in Sweden.

He heads Water Journalists Africa- the network of journalists in Africa who report on water and sanitation. He is also an ambassador for the Netherlands' based The WaterChannel www.thewaterchannel.tv