

**International Conference on
Broadcast Media and Climate Change
4-5 September 2009, UNESCO Headquarters, Paris**

**Frontline reporters: community media
and the challenge of climate change**

Steve Buckley, President AMARC

Colleagues and friends,

I am going to talk about grassroots media and communications but first let me put this in a broader context of the existential challenge we face. Put rather crudely, it might be said we are gathered here to address the question “Can the media help save the planet?”

Most of us who work in the media do so because we believe the media is important – not only as a source of information, but also as a mechanism for holding decision makers to account, as a public arena for debate and value formation, as a means of early warning, and so on.

Yet, as a whole, the media record on climate change is poor. Coverage of global warming has been rather superficial, barely challenging the inadequate efforts of governments to address the problem. Both the media and the political classes have been behind the curve in the face of powerful scientific evidence. Whilst the scientists themselves are among the first to admit that they are desperately trying to catch up with the realities on the ground.

Media attention in the North, in particular, has tended to focus on strategies for reduction of greenhouse gases. It suggests, by adjusting an emissions restriction here and adding a market mechanism there, the threat of global warming having significant impact on our day-to-lives will recede. But, if media producers themselves are still struggling to comprehend the scale and the immediacy of the challenge where does this leave media audiences?

When glaciers melt early and don't return, when the monsoon brings heavier floods than usual, when drought destroys the crop harvest - people on the frontline of climate change, the vast majority in developing countries, are acutely aware that they are not living in normal times. The developing countries most

affected are already planning for adaptation, not prevention. Climate change is here, and it has been for some time.

In recent years media coverage of climate change has certainly increased, particularly since the 4th assessment report of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, and now it is reaching even greater heights as negotiations intensify in the run up to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting in Copenhagen in December.

Alongside the negotiations on emissions targets, attention is being given to long term co-operation on adaptation and related issues including the need to strengthen communication, education and awareness-raising at all levels, especially at the local and community levels. Let me turn to that now.

When we talk about climate change communications at the grassroots we need to avoid falling into the classic instrumentalist model of the media. The challenge is not, by any means, simply one of getting the message across. Community-based media and communications systems at the local level are for more integrated into the lives of their communities, often carrying a strong emphasis on participatory communication.

They have multiple roles to play – providing a forum for discussion and debate, facilitating the appropriation of knowledge and information into local contexts and cultures, and facilitating influence and advocacy. They enable local communities to hold decision makers to account and to call for action where it is needed.

Although raising public awareness and understanding is important this is also a two way process. It is often local people and communities - highly sensitive to changes in their own environment – that are among the first to observe and comment on climate change, long before scientists and other experts can compile their empirical data. Community media are the frontline reporters in climate change.

From its early origins in the Americas, the concept and practice of community broadcasting has spread around the world and is present on all continents and in the majority of countries. Many of the countries and communities most directly and immediately affected by climate change have community media projects already playing an important role in environmental awareness and action for sustainable development.

In the Peruvian Amazon, community radio stations like Radio La Voz de la Selva (which means Voice of the Rainforest) are monitoring and promoting action against illegal logging and defending indigenous people's livelihoods. In Northern Quebec, Inuit communication networks are providing advice on safety as hunting routes across sea ice become increasingly precarious. In Mali, rural community radio stations are working to assist farmers adapt to changing seasonal patterns in order to maintain and increase their harvest. In Bangladesh, coastal NGOs are building community radio stations and other communication tools to provide systems for early warning and disaster management in the face of floods and inundations that result from rising sea levels.

These are just some of the examples of community media in the frontline of climate change. Where these media operate they can very often play a vital role, but there also remain countries where community-based and grassroots communications systems are greatly underdeveloped – held back by a lack of access to spectrum, economic resources and infrastructure; hindered by a lack of political will to enable people to take voice - to speak out - through their own media, on issues that affect their lives and livelihoods.

AMARC, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, is the international membership association that groups together community radio stations and their associations worldwide. We have been working to build the capacity of our sector to face the challenge of climate change. In the Americas, working with the United Nations Environment Programme, we have developed training materials on environmental awareness for community radio reporters. In Africa we have worked with the Food and Agriculture Organisation on campaigns to promote food security. In Asia we have worked with local disaster communication experts and with the Japanese International Co-operation Agency, to develop disaster response systems for community broadcasting.

Worldwide we have sought to strengthen political recognition for the value and role of grassroots and community-based media, defending community broadcasters where their existence is under threat, pressing governments to open their airwaves for media ownership by community-based organizations, where they have not yet done so.

Sometimes, as in Senegal after the 2004 locust invasion, more recently in increasingly flood prone Bangladesh, it has been climate related disaster itself that has helped to persuade governments of the need to enable people and

communities to establish their own communication systems for early warning, disaster management and mitigation.

What we have found, across the world, is that community broadcasters themselves in diverse environments and contexts are grappling with similar challenges, developing solutions that work and are eager to share their experience and to learn from others.

What we also know is that this grassroots communication sector has powerful stories to offer about the real impacts of climate change and of other threats to the environment.

We welcome, therefore, the initiative of UNESCO, together with UNEP, in convening this conference. Working with other agencies and media groups what we would like to see is not only quality media coverage at the global level but much greater emphasis on supporting the frontline reporters on climate change – building local capacity, through access to training and equipment to sustain their vital work, strengthening a network for knowledge sharing and exchange, and assisting bring their stories to global audiences.

To Copenhagen, in December, we will bring a team of reporters from community media – people from the frontline of climate change who are actively engaged in environmental reporting. We invite others to work with us, in common cause, to strengthen the voices of the grassroots in confronting this great challenge of our time.

Thank you for listening.

Steve Buckley
4 September 2009

Further information:
www.amarc.org
sbuckley@gn.apc.org