The Challenge of Doing Participatory Communication in Disaster Risk Reduction in Malawi

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Abstract

The study examines the role of communication in disaster risk reduction (DRR) in Malawi. I find that communication in DRR focuses mostly on behavior change communication (BCC). This is an expected finding because of a combination of ideological, individual and institutional pressures which are the same factors that drive policy formulation in other sectors such as agriculture and international aid. However, I also found evidence that specific factors such as media, health communication and international policies influence policies in DRR which are the study's novel findings. This not only has implications for how actors might influence policy in future to be more participatory – but also leads me to theorise policymaking in terms of BCC and participatory communication within the field of disaster risk reduction.

Key words: Development communication; Disaster risk reduction; Policy-making

Introduction

The problem of flooding is a common story that cuts across all corners of the world. Statistics indicate that between 1998 and 2017, floods affected more than two billion people worldwide as its frequency and intensity continue to increase due to climate change [1]. In Malawi, reports also indicate that disasters have increased in magnitude, impact and frequency (The Malawi Post Disaster Needs Assessment, 2019). For example, in the last five decades alone, the report says the country recorded about 30 climatic shocks. The National Resilience Strategy [2]. notes that Malawi experienced the worst floods in 50 years in 2015 as it claimed 278 lives, affected 1.1 million people and displaced 230 000 households. However, the magnitude of this disaster has been surpassed by the 2023 disaster caused by Tropical Cyclone Freddy which is said to be the longest-lasting tropical cyclone on record, according to the World Meteorological Organisation. The current record is held by a 31-day hurricane in 1994, says the organisation. Freddy, which first developed on February 6 2023 and made its second landfall in Mozambique on March 11 2023, since killed over 1 000 and displaced close to 600 000 people.

With such a rise, it appears Malawi is less prepared to reduce the risk associated with the disasters. This is because the country is still using an old law of 1991 that emphasises on response, relief and recovery instead of disaster risk reduction. This is unlike other countries like South Africa [3]. Which have reformed their policies to focus on risk reduction? International institutions, such as the United Nations, encourage nations to adopt a risk management approach for them to mitigate and prepare for disasters so as to protect their people from devastation. Twiggy (2014: 2) says the risk management approach is "a systematic approach to identifying, assessing and reducing disaster risks". The author argues that communication of information to the public is central to this approach since "vulnerable people need to know about the hazards and risks they face, and the measures they can take to mitigate and prepare for potential disasters [4]. He argues:

Many disaster reduction programmes include public education and information for this reason, but a high level of expertise is needed to make such communications effective in changing attitudes and practice. Few disaster managers possess this kind of expertise. Often, information and educational activities are added onto projects rather than being integral parts of them, the methods chosen for communicating are inappropriate, and the communities at risk have no opportunity to represent their views [4].

This study therefore seeks to understand the role of communication in disaster risk reduction in Malawi as its overall

research aim. To examine this, the study sets out to answer two research questions: How is communication conceptualized in DRR legislation and policies in Malawi and why do policymakers conceive development communication in the manner that it is conceptualized in the policy documents? These research questions seek to fill an existing gap in literature on the drivers of policy-making for development communication within DRR.

It is important to undertake this study because disasters have become severe not only in Malawi, but the world at large. In Malawi, it is even surprising because floods affect almost the same areas and the same households, with victims resisting government's policy action to resettle those living in disaster-prone areas [5]. In fact, the resettlement policy direction, which may be viewed as 'development' in general sense, has become a contested concept between policymakers and the local communities. Undertaking this study will help inform policy change for engaging communities since development, as Peet and Hartwick (2015) argue, is a contentious issue which has several conventional and unconventional positions within it. Such is the case with development communication which is not just about communicating development, but rather a contestation of the very notion of development [6].
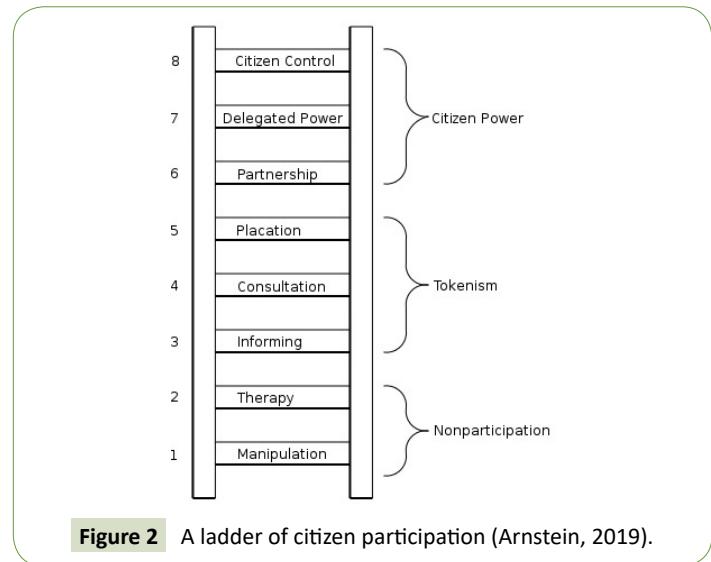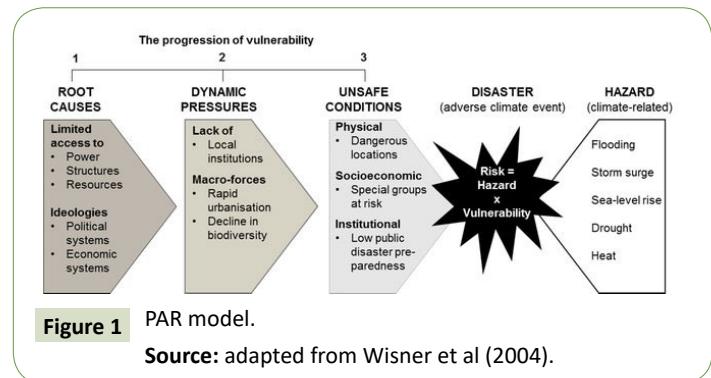
Conceptual framework

The study uses two theoretical disaster models, namely, the Pressure and Release (PAR) model; and the Access to Resources (ATR) model, to understand the phenomenon of disasters. These are underpinned by the development communication theory to understand the concepts of behaviour change communication and participatory communication.

DRR analytical framework: PAR and ATR models

Pressure and Release (PAR) model: The Pressure and Release (PAR) model, developed by Blaike et al (1994) and later modified by Wisner et al (2004), argues that the occurrence of disasters is not simply as a result of the presence of a hazard. But rather a compound function of the natural hazard and the number of people exposed to the hazard as it is shown in figure 1 below. In other words, a disaster occurs when a natural hazard meets vulnerable people. The model therefore acts as a guide to the understanding of how to reduce disaster risk. Kita (2017: 159), for instance, posits that the model is important to effectively assess if measures on DRR are "actually reducing disaster risks or not". In this study, the model will be important to assess whether DRR legislation in Malawi helps to reduce the risk of disasters (**Figure 1**).

The access to resources (ATR) model: Wisner (2004) modified the PAR model to formulate the Access to Resources (ATR) model. ATR facilitates the understanding of how people make decisions based on their access to resources in the face of disasters. The model also explains whether efforts to rebuild or recover from a disaster make any difference since people make decisions in the economic-political environments. As such, Nirupama (2012) argues that for a comprehensive understanding of vulnerability and reducing disaster risk, there is need of integrating the two theoretical models because ATR helps understand what drives people to make particular decisions in the face of disasters. This

Figure 1 PAR model.
Source: adapted from Wisner et al (2004).

Figure 2 A ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 2019).

study agrees with Nirupama (2012); hence, adopting both models because participatory communication, as the later section will show, does not happen without paying attention to community's perceptions of a particular development issue such as disaster risk.

Development communication theory

This section reviews two approaches to the study of development communication. These are media for development and participatory communication. However, the section first of all explains what the concept of development communication entails.

Development communication: Same concept, different names: Development Communication, as defined by Quebral (2006: 101) who pioneered the field, "is the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfilment of the human potential". Manyozo (2012) and Scott (2014) categorise development communication along three dominant thinking, namely, media development, media for development (M4D) or behavior change communication (BCC) and participatory communication. To understand how DRR policy documents in Malawi conceptualise communication, the study will pay special emphasis on BCC and participatory communication due to their duality and contrasting features

which are at the core of this study.

Media for development approach: Media for development (M4D) or behavior change communication (BCC) is defined as "the strategic use of the media as a tool for delivering positive change in individuals' knowledge, attitude and practice in order to achieve development results" [7]. Further from this definition, Scott (2014) argues that M4D is all about information provision, cultivation of appropriate attitudes, and that it assumes communication to be linear and unidirectional where change is also assumed to be planned, controlled, targeted, measurable, predictable and managed by external change agents. The aim of this approach, according to Manyozo (2012), is to educate audiences and influence positive behaviour change and, ultimately, this approach sees the media as a fundamental strategy that drives the process of communicating development.

This approach is rooted within the modernisation theory of development where development, as Pieterse (2010) notes, was viewed as social transformation involving industrialisation, urbanisation, and a shift in focus from 'traditional' to 'modern' social values. Some of the earlier communication theorists [8-10] propagated diffusions models of knowledge management and dissemination – which focused on knowledge transfer leading to behavior change.

Sinha (1976) says its genesis can be traced to the introduction and application of Agricultural Extension during in the late 1940s and early 1950s in most of the developing countries. The turning point was after the World War II when major aid, interventions, and the beginnings of modernization planning and schemes commenced. This was after the war had ravaged Europe. And the US initiated the European Recovery Programme known as the Marshall Plan to rebuild Europe. Melkote and Steve's (2015) say the success of the Marshall Plan inspired similar projects in Third World countries. One of it is the Point Four Programme a Third World version of the Marshall Plan. The cause or goal was to improve the lives and lot of inhabitants of the periphery regions of the world to catch-up [11]. With the West. McPhail (2009) says even communication at the time, particularly radio, was viewed as being central to improving the economic and social lot of the poor in the southern hemisphere.

This approach has drawn critiques from scholars who argue that communication does not end at information provision. For instance, Huesca (2008), Manyozo (2012) and Scott (2014) argue that BCC perpetuates the dominant development paradigm that places superiority of Western values over traditional norms. In addition, the approach is faulted for failing to recognize agency in individuals as they are viewed as passive, inactive, uncritical and lack imagination. The scholars further argue that BCC ignores and fails to address underlying social, political, and economic structures such as poverty and inequality that contradict development goals. Such critiques led to the emergence of participatory communication approach as a postcolonial response to dominant paradigm and their attendant communication models.

Participatory communication approach: Participatory Communication is described as a community-based engagement approach through which development stakeholders employ participatory communication to author development from below [12]. This means one of the defining features of participatory communication is a resistance to 'top-down' approaches [11] which are dominant in BCC.

Proponents of participatory communication argue that this approach is better than BCC because it is dialogical, inclusive, community driven and uses locally owned communication technologies and inter-personal communication channels. Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009) say participatory communication emphasises on participatory and collective processes in research, problem identification, decision making, implementation, and evaluation of change for the purpose of addressing structural inequalities and social change. As Morris (2005) and Scott (2014) observe, this is rooted in Paulo Freire's (1970) Pedagogy of the Oppressed which advocates for community involvement and dialogue as a catalyst for empowerment both at the individual and community level. Although an educationist himself, Freire's (1970) model of participation is celebrated in the participatory communication approach for his theory of conscientization a critical point at which the marginalised reflect on and become aware of their problems for collective action and empowerment.

Arnstein (2019) argues that citizen participation in decision making processes can be understood through "the ladder of citizen participation". The theory, as shown in figure 2, says participation moves through different levels, from manipulation and therapy (non-participation) degrees of tokenism (including information provision, consultation and placation), to 'degrees of citizen control' (partnership, delegated power and citizen control) (Figure 2).

If harnessed properly, participation has the potential to empower citizens, achieve equity and social justice. For instance, Chilvers (2009) argues that participation can give citizens power to influence decisions that affect their lives; increase public trust and legitimize governing institutions; enhance acceptance of environmental policy; and reduce conflict surrounding decisions [13].

The concept of participation, however, has its own shortfalls. Firstly, Chilvers (2009: 402) finds that participation is "unpredictable, causes conflict and wastes time and resources". The second critique is that participants involved in deliberative processes are unrepresentative of wider affected populations. Thirdly, it is argued that proponents of participation are naive on the complexities of power and power relations. And lastly, participation is criticized based on how consensus of deliberative matters is arrived at. The argument is that behind consensus are issues of hegemonic power relations that exclude certain voices, framings and forms of expression [14].

Empirical evidence

DRR and communication

There is a growing body of literature on the use of participatory communication in disaster risk reduction. The reviewed literature shows that studies are focused on how participatory development communication theory informs practice. In the review, some

scholars agree that proper development communication strategies are needed to reduce disaster risk and vulnerability, and limit or avoid the impact of hazards in order to advance sustainable development. Twigg (2004), Chagutah (2009) and Maartens (2011), for example, note that participatory communication is central to risk management, arguing that vulnerable people need to know about the risks and hazards they face, and how to mitigate or prepare for impending disasters. Twigg (2014), for instance, notes that communication is directional, arguing that development practitioners need to know the views and priorities of the vulnerable people they seek to assist with DRR projects.

In agreement, Reid et al (2009) observe that participatory DRR as opposed to BCC involves working with local people to understand the types of hazards they face, the factors which make them vulnerable to these hazards, and their causes. The authors argue that such an approach paints a picture of "how at-risk communities are" and which groups are more vulnerable. This also helps communities "consider what capacities they have for reducing vulnerability, and aim to empower communities to take action themselves to reduce the risk they face [15].

For Waisbord (2008: 507), the ideal situation for participatory communication programmes is when communities are viewed as protagonists of processes for social change rather than passive beneficiaries of decisions made by foreign experts. He also argues that participatory communication proposes a 'communitarian' view that makes deliberation and participation in public affairs central, rather than information-transmission. Participatory communication also conceives development as a transformative process at both individual and social levels through which communities become empowered and that it promotes local forms of knowledge and action as the springboard for social change [16].

For example, Harris (2014) explored how participatory communication can be used to communicate the impacts of climate change on cultural heritage and human rights in Asia and the Pacific. He argues that the task of tackling climate change impacts and risks needs creative and innovative ways that involve communities. One of the ways is through participatory communication which, he opines, empowers local communities to "record their own cultural practices and local knowledge [17]. This gives prominence to local knowledge because indigenous peoples who are primary victims of disasters have an opportunity to share their lived experiences of disasters and how they adapt to such occurrences. Harris' (2014) study draws on experiences of Namata Village in Fiji who used participatory video to communicate climate change. The study found that participatory media "ensures greater representation of communities' voices in national policy development" (Harris, 2014: 326); encourages dialogue between researchers and local communities; awakens communities' self-awareness; develops a critical consciousness about one's circumstances; and empowers participants through the act of producing media messages [18].

Scholars however acknowledge that participatory communication approaches are fraught with a number of challenges. Some of the challenges are based on the quality of participatory processes and practice, scaling up, sustainability, and other problems related to monitoring and evaluation and power. For example, Tufte (2017: 144) says participatory communication "has difficulties capturing synergies, off-track outcomes, intangible change processes and longer-term outcomes beyond the planned period of monitoring".

On the other hand, Lane and Corbett (2005) found that participatory communication is difficult to evaluate. The two examined and challenged the claim that "community-based environmental management is fairer and more democratic than so-called 'top-down' approaches" [18] In their findings, using a case study on indigenous peoples' participation in environmental policy formulation and programmes in Australia, they argued that participatory approaches to environmental management have the potential to further marginalize minority groups due to power relations that favour local elites.

The other contentious issue is the concept of "community". Lane and Corbett (2005) problematize the way "community" is viewed. They argue that proponents of participatory communication assume "community" is some distinct and homogenous entity replete with consensus and solidarity in decision making. Such a view, they argue, accounts for claims that participation of local actors and developing a 'community' position "is a democratic process and free of exercise of power" [19]. Yet, in reality, in a community there are diverse groups with competing interests. These groups, according to Lane and Corbett (2005), are based on gender, ethnicity, class, age and others. This means if a decision-making process is to be democratic then all these groups need to be represented.

DRR policy formulation and communication

The above findings fall within the body of other literature such as Man bridge (1983:154), as cited by Lane and Corbett (2005), who found that decision-making tends to be manipulative and access to participation in programmes controlled. Scholars note that this problem is a reflection of problems in policymaking processes. Washboard (2008) argues that the key determinants relate to institutional challenges of participatory communication in development, such as international aid. He found that institutions favour information models of communication over participatory approaches due to a number of factors. He argues that the selection of BCC approaches is not primarily based on "their analytical or normative value, but rather, on institutional factors and expectations [19]. Among them include bureaucratic requirements, the weak status of communication as a field of study and practice, and the institutional predominance of a technical mind-set. These put pressure on institutions to undermine the potential nature of participatory communication. It is this quagmire between development communication theory and policy that has failed the practice of DRR.

In agreement, Chinsinga and Chasukwa (2018) argue that climate change policies in Malawi are shaped by interests held by the actors. The two found that prevailing narratives of climate change and agriculture in Malawi shape policy direction and associated interventions. The outcome of this, the authors argue, is that policy interventions are competitive whenever the actors' interests collide, and the policy interventions are complimentary whenever there are common interests among policy actors. Thus concludes their paper:

The paper concludes that policies and programme activities are framed in diverse way depending on how climate change and agriculture issues are perceived and narrated as well as how power is exercised among different players, mainly, policymakers, donors and civil society organizations [20, 21].

Pardoe et al (2019) specifically looked at political influences on the emergence and evolution of climate change adaptation policy and planning at national level in institutions of Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia. The authors found that various reasons that shape policies on climate change adaptation. These include national leadership and its associated political priorities, and the role of funding provided by donors.

Extending similar studies to other developing countries, Pelling and Holloway (2006) found five common aspects that shape DRR legislation. These are political context and recent disaster events; participation of key stakeholders; clear leadership and a common vision of disasters as developmental and distinct from disaster management; recognition as opposed to duplication of proper strategies for the implementation of DRR; and development of pre-existing policy that fulfils DRR functions. The authors came up with these aspects in an analysis of 119 national reports submitted to the UN World Conference on Disaster Reduction, Hyogo, in 2005, as part of their study on legislation for mainstreaming disaster risk reduction. The study focused on South Africa, but included cases from various countries across the global to review processes and strategies that inform legislation reform.

Their findings show that DRR legislation in South Africa has moved away from focusing on emergency response, relief and recovery. The authors therefore argue that South Africa presents a unique case study because its legislation is "applauded internationally as a path-breaking example of national legislation that promotes disaster risk reduction [22, 23].

From this literature review, it is evident that most studies on participatory communication in DRR are concentrated on the analysis of participatory communication processes and how it is practiced by various institutions or in various localities. The empirical evidence also shows that most studies on policy-making processes focus on factors that shape how decisions are made on various issues such as agriculture and climate change [24] international aid [25], environmental policy climate change adaptation policy and planning (Pardoe et al (2019) and DRR legislation Little or no research is done to understand how development communication is conceptualized in DRR legislation, and what informs policy makers to conceive development communication in the form that it is represented in the frameworks. This study therefore seeks to fill this lacuna by reviewing Malawi's DRR legislation and policies to understand how development communication is conceptualized. The study will also fill this gap by analysing drivers of policymaking as regards to development communication.

Methodology

Study approach and philosophical assumption

The study uses qualitative research approaches to examine the role of communication in disaster risk reduction in Malawi. Creswell and Creswell (2008: 41) note that qualitative research is "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". In this case, the study explores the meaning policy makers ascribe to the problem of disasters in Malawi. In addition, the study employed such an approach because, as Bleiker et al (2019: 5) argue, qualitative research brings "richness and depth, offering insights into how individuals interpret and make sense and meaning of their experiences". This is because qualitative approach uses multiple sources of data which, some of it, is collected in participants' setting, analysed inductively, and the researcher makes interpretations of the meaning of the data collected (ibid).

Study design

The research is designed as a case study on Malawi "in which a researcher develops an in-depth analysis" of policy formulation processes in disaster risk management activities "using a variety of data collection procedures" [26, 27]. The study opted to focus on Malawi because the country offers a unique case study in the practice of DRR. Malawi is using an old legal framework yet other countries in the region like South Africa have reformed their policies. For instance, the development of legislation to manage and prepare for disasters in Malawi began in 1991. This was after a flood disaster and rock avalanche had hit the remote district of Phalombe where it left a death toll of about 1 000 people [28]. As a response, the Malawi Parliament passed and enacted the Disaster Preparedness and Relief Act (1991). The country also has the National Disaster Risk Management Policy (2015) which was approved after another disaster in 2015. To operationalize the policy, Malawi developed The National Environment and Climate Change Communication Strategy (2016). This was preceded by The National Environmental Education and Communication Strategy (1994-1999). Presently, the country has the National Disaster Risk Management Communication Strategy: Voice from Primary Audience (2020-2023) which is still in draft form. The study will focus on these documents in Malawi as a case study to have an in-depth analysis of the issue.

Data collection

The study reviewed and analysed the documents stated above to understand how communication is conceived in Malawi's DRR legislation. Given (2008: 232) defines a document as "a text-based file that may include primary data or secondary data Document analysis therefore "focuses primarily on what is contained within them" and the documents are viewed as "conduits of communication between, say, a writer and a reader [29]. These documents were chosen because they are the key policy documents as regards to DRR in Malawi.

The study also conducted key informant interviews to understand why policy makers conceptualise communication in the form that it is presented in the documents. The study conducted the interviews using an interview guide with semi-structured questions. Interviews were conducted online through Zoom and most of them lasted up to 40 minutes.

Given (2018: 506) defines key informants as "individuals who are articulate and knowledgeable about their community". The study

settled for this data collection procedure because key informants provide "an understanding of cultural norms and responsibilities" (ibid). The study categorized the key informants into three; namely, government policy actors, civil society policy actors and communication/media specialists or practitioners.

Sampling

Gentles (2016), Creswell and Creswell (2018) and given (2008) agree that the idea behind qualitative research is to purposively select participants who will best help the researcher understand the problem and research objectives. In this case, the study employed stakeholder sampling (selection of major stakeholders) which is best suited in policy analysis [30]. The study therefore purposively selected two senior officials from DoDMA, two from MET, five from the civil society and four practicing communications specialists to bring the total number of potential participants to 13. However, nine participants availed themselves to take part in the study. These were offered anonymity through a consent form signed by both the researcher and the participants.

Data analysis

The study used thematic analysis as a strategy to analyse the interviews. Given (2018) says with this approach, data is segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data set. The study therefore transcribed all interviews and the data was then coded by categorizing reoccurring ideas such as phrases, terms and expressions that were shared by most participants. Given (2008) argues that when these recurring codes are grounded in data, they become themes.

However, the study went beyond merely identifying the themes as it built on these additional layers of complex analysis to uncover deeper meanings within the themes [31]. This was further analysed and interpreted by triangulating the coded interview data and bouncing it back and forth with the reviewed literature.

Findings

Communication as un-important, information provision and participatory

The findings show that Malawi's DRR Act of 1991 hardly mentioned the role of communication whereas the proceeding policy documents conceptualized communication mostly in terms of behavior change communication. But more recent strategies have adapted to participatory communication although a critical discourse analysis of the documents shows it is a hybrid approach to communication with emphasis on information-provision rather than citizen control.

Communication is hardly mentioned in the act

The Disaster Preparedness and Relief Act (1991) is one of the most important regulations in Malawi as it guides preparations and response activities to disasters. However, a review of the 20-page document shows that the Act does not regard communication as one of its priority areas. For instance, the Act regulates the establishment of the National Disaster Preparedness and Relief Committee of Malawi referred to as the 'Committee'. The Act

orders that the Committee shall be made up of representatives from almost all key sectors such as health, agriculture, gender, transport, among others. No mention is made of a representative from the Communication sector. A review of the document further reveals that only twice does the Act mention the role of communication in disaster preparedness and response. This is when it outlines the functions of the Commissioner and the civil protection officer. These functions include "disseminating information on matters of civil protection and on activities in civil protection to local authorities or to the public generally".

A review of the Act also shows that it mandates Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DoDMA), which sits in the Office of the President and Cabinet (OPC), to govern and coordinate disaster management affairs in Malawi. The Act is entirely oriented towards response, relief and recovery as it says its main aim is to "make provision for the co-ordination and implementation of measures to alleviate effects of disasters". This is as opposed to disaster risk reduction which uses participatory communication as its main strategy of implementation. This simply shows how the law views communication as un-important. And in a few times that communication is mentioned, the Act conceptualises it as information-provision.

Development communication as behaviour change communication

Communication as information-provision

The Disaster Preparedness and Relief Act (1991) also sets the tone for what to expect in most of Malawi's DRR policies and strategies. A review of the documents shows that most of the policies and strategies were developed to enforce the Act, and these have followed the same pattern where communication is mostly conceptualized as information provision. The National Environmental Education and Communication Strategy (NEECS) of 1994, for instance, was developed with the aim of "facilitating public awareness" through dissemination of information on environment and natural resources management. However, the emergence of climate change narratives necessitated a review of the strategy to birth The National Environment and Climate Change Communication Strategy (NECCCS), 2012-2016 which highlights the need for more "innovative messages and communication tools" as a means to increase adaptation. The document says access, sharing and utilization of information on environment and climate change influence behavioural changes consistent with necessary adaptation and mitigation [32].

This concept follows the thinking of earlier communication theorists such as Lerner (1958), Schramm (1964), and Rogers (1962) who propagated diffusionist models of knowledge management and dissemination which focused on knowledge transfer leading to behavior change [33]. It reads: "NECCCS has, therefore, been prepared with the primary objective of increasing public awareness and promoting positive behavioral change for sustainable development" [34] This is also outlined in its vision, mission statement, scope, goal and aims which are centred on information-provision as outlined in its goal: "To effectively and efficiently provide information, education, and communication guide on environment and climate change issues that promote

positive behavioral change for sustainable development" [35].

This is evidence that the strategy has adopted behavior change communication models as its underpinning conceptual framework. The assumption is that the information on DRR to be provided to communities has a direct impact on individuals for behavior and social change.

Development communication as public awareness

A discourse analysis of the documents also shows that communication in DRR is mostly conceived as awareness-raising. The NECCCS comes out very clearly of its dual role, stating that it is meant to raise awareness of the necessity to mitigate and adapt to climate change and provide information on the same. Among others, the Strategy says people are ignorant of the causes of environmental degradation and how to tackle them; ignorant of environmental problems and how it affects them; and that people do not take into account issues of climate change when making decisions. The document analysis shows that one of the strategies to deal with this ignorance, apart from information dissemination, is public awareness. A Minister wrote in the foreword of the NECCCS that "public awareness still remains low" in addressing environment and climate change challenges. The NECCCS, therefore, was developed with the aim of facilitating public awareness on environment and natural resources management. Wrote the Minister: "NECCCS has, therefore, been prepared with the primary objective of increasing public awareness and promoting positive behavioral change for sustainable development.

As argued earlier, public awareness is under the BCC which is rooted within the modernization paradigm of development which equates development to westernization or urbanization. The theory is a battle between modernity and tradition where local values are regarded backwards, primitive and unsophisticated. This is manifested in the highly publicized Malawi's disaster of 1991 and its subsequent communication policies that were formulated. For example, the local communities in Phalombe possess knowledge of the flooding that happened and its early warning signs although they do not refer to it as floods. In their culture, the flooding is known as Napolo a mythological two-tailed animal that lives underneath the rocks of mountains. It is believed that its migration from one mountain to the other causes flooding and rock avalanche as witnessed in 1991 [36] However, the NEECS of 1994 and its subsequent reviewed policy of 2012 – 2016 neglected such cultural understanding to integrate indigenous knowledge with scientific knowledge into policy formulation. Instead, the policies argue that "few people in the country appreciate the causes, impacts and consequences of environmental degradation and climate change" and that "information and communication are vital for behavior change Such tenets are a backbone of BCC models of communication which assume that information is linear and unidirectional as it moves from 'sender' to 'receiver' through a particular channel. In this case, the role of communication is to raise awareness about disaster risk and, as Scott (2014) argues, to demonstrate the positive reasons to adopt a particular set of behaviours. Communication as public awareness therefore assumes that

change is planned, controlled, targeted, measurable and predictable [37].

Development communication as mass media, PR

The analysis also shows that communication in DRR in Malawi is also conceptualized as mass media, public relations, social marketing and advertising in some sections of the documents. Under this component, the strategies envision to utilize various opportunities and platforms to disseminate information. These include milestones or new initiatives, missions of high-profile personalities, press releases, adverts, articles published in the press, radio, television and social media. These are said to be viable channels to disseminate information and raise awareness on disaster risk. Reads an extract from NECCCS "The priority of the communication work is to convey the message that all the people need to know to influence behavioral changes. All forms of media can be used to convey a variety of messages and spur to action in different ways".

The assumption with this conceptualisation is that increased access to and participation in the public sphere will help communities adapt to climate change impacts. This thinking is grounded in various media studies theories such as 'two step flow' model of communication where information flows from the media to the general public through opinion leaders such as "high profile personalities". The documents are also informed by the 'hypodermic needle' model of communication which assumes that "the mass media have a direct and powerful effect on passive audiences. This conceptualization of DRR communication advances the modernization paradigm. This is because the media is being used as a vehicle to spread "good practices for reducing disaster risk" while leaving local communities at the receiving end of the information and ignoring their capacity to adapt to climate change with the indigenous knowledge systems that they possess.

Development communication as advocacy, social mobilization, community engagement and participation

Lastly, the documents review finds that communication in DRR, mostly in more recent documents, is conceived as advocacy, social mobilization, community engagement and participation. For example, the NDRMCS (2020) outlines that communication for development helps lobby for political support to shape policy; motivate and mobilize civil society actors to help vulnerable groups claim their rights; and empower local communities to improve their resilience. For them, four main approaches are used to achieve the above objectives. These are behavior change communication, community-led social change, social mobilization, social advocacy, community engagement and citizen participation. These approaches seek to "inform, influence and support households and individuals to adopt, practice and sustain a set of desired behaviours"; "engage and empower communities"; "engage and mobilize civil society"; and "mobilize local level leadership to endorse and develop mechanisms to ensure that the perspectives, concerns and voices of affected households and communities are reflected in upstream policy dialogue and decision-making" (NDRMCS, 2020: 26). Among

other channels, the strategy seeks to use theatre for development, exhibits, traditional media (rites, ceremonies, folklore, and dances), demonstrations and big walk as modes of engagement with local communities for inclusion, dialogue and make use of locally owned communication technologies and interpersonal communication. This is also evidenced from the title of the NDRMCS (National Disaster Risk Management Communication Strategy: Voice from Primary Audience (2020-2023) which signal that it will pay special attention to "voices" of local communities.

As much as the strategy seems to be participatory in nature, this study finds that it is actually a hybrid of development communication. This is because it combines both BCC and participatory communication approaches. In fact, the level of participation as conceptualized in the documents is mere "tokenism" which is the lowest level of participation on Arnstein's (2019) ladder of citizen participation. Arnstein (2019) argues that tokenism includes information provision, consultation and placation. In the documents, policy actors have already designed messages to be disseminated to communities during their planned community engagements. The documents have also made it clear that implementation of the strategies and activities "will be led and coordinated by the government…" which, in this case, it's the Department of Disaster Management Affairs. In Manyozo's (2017: 134) words, this defeats the whole purpose of participation because it remains "a top-down and vertical approach and style of governance". In fact, this is far below the ultimate goal of participation which is to achieve citizen control (partnership and delegated power) and "conscientization". To borrow from Freire (1970), participation is about who controls the process. Melkote and Steeves (2015) add that participation is a process of empowering people to take charge in identifying problems they face and their solutions. The two argue that this is possible if recipients of projects participate in the design and execution of the development project. Gumucio-Dagron (2001) says such a concept of participation emphasises on the process rather than the end product. From this, it is clear that the hybrid concept of communication in DRR strategies in Malawi is largely tilted towards information provision and behavior change [38].

Discussion and Analysis

Looking Good: Media narratives, communication and the practice of DRR in Malawi

This section answers the second research question: why do policy makers conceive development communication in the manner that it is conceptualized in the policy documents? The section argues that policymakers are influenced by a combination of individual, institutional, international and ideological factors to conceive communication as outlined in the documents. The study further argues that these factors are a reflection of a wider sphere shaped by how the media and communications are practiced in Malawi and the impact of international policies on Malawi's disaster affairs [39].

Why communication is hardly mentioned in Malawi's disaster act?

According to three government officials, most government departments, including DoDMA and MET, do not have communication specialists in key decision-making positions to the level of directors. Two of the officials, who are in senior positions at DoDMA, corroborated that the department does not have a fully-fledged communication unit to guarantee the position of communications director as its head. In fact, the officials noted, the person handling DRR communications in the department is a public relations officer (PRO) whose position is an "ad hoc thing", meaning that the PRO position "is not part and parcel of the establishment at DoDMA" (Senior DoDMA official). Yet within the same department, there are directors responsible for disaster response and recovery while communication is treated as a 'by-the-way' thing.

While DoDMA is able to engage a PRO, the Department of Climate Change and Meteorological Services (MET) depends on scientists to do communication work. An officer in the department said this is due to understaffing. He explained:

I am a forecaster, but I am also tasked with communication work. We are about five in this predicament. We work seven days a week in shifts. But we are all meteorologists. We are not communication specialists.

This is different with the way other government ministries such as health and agriculture operate. These have fully-fledged communication units or departments that are tasked with production of information, dissemination, monitoring and evaluation, and implementation of other communication projects. This helps set the agenda on health or agriculture communication unlike with disasters. This reflects the weak status of communication as a field of practice within DRR in Malawi and it confirms Waisbord's (2008: 505) findings that "weak status of communication as a field of study and practice" is one of the drivers of policy making.

This study argues that communications within the practice of DRR in Malawi is faced with stereotyped and ideological views that it is less important as compared to other fields. This explains why the Act is somehow silent on the role of communications in disasters. A renowned communication specialist in Malawi said having communication specialists as directors in government departments like DoDMA and MET would help drive the agenda on DRR and effect policy change.

However, it needs to be noted that more recently the rise of media attention in the coverage of disasters has pushed DoDMA to have the communication officer albeit in low rank. A senior official at DoDMA said it was until 2015 when floods killed 278 people that they engaged the services of a communications person. He testifies

We didn't have a PRO before 2015. It was me, a technical officer, who would double as a spokesperson. But the floods of 2015 forced us to liaise with Ministry of Information to second a PRO to us because the level of engagement with the media had increased.

This shows that increase in news coverage of disasters influenced policy actors to engage services of a communication person. However, the DoDMA officer notes that the person engaged is not a development communication specialist per say, but a journalist

to act as a PRO with the intention of providing responses to the increased media queries.

Why is communication mentioned mostly in terms of information provision?

Politics, DRR funding and the media

The second key finding is that politics and funding issues are some of the drivers of policy making in Malawi. Politics affects DRR policy making processes in two fronts. Firstly, the study established that issues of disaster management affairs are centrally located at the Office of President and Cabinet (OPC). Secondly, in terms of funding for disasters, the study found that the resources come from Parliament as a Vote under OPC. As such, there is more impetus to use such funding as a political tool to respond to emergencies. A renowned climate change specialist and activist argues: "Political will is a bit silent on DRR, but high when it comes to emergencies because experience shows that politicians capitalize on relief items to score political points."

The study argues that this is compounded by the way the mass media reports on disasters. A senior member of the Association of Environmental Journalists in Malawi (AEJ) observes that most of its members and the Malawi media in general focus on disaster response in their reportage rather than covering the full cycle of a disaster risk management spectrum which has five critical stages such as prevention, mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. Even on response, the member observed that the media limits its attention to vulnerability by highlighting death toll or number of affected households. Three members of the civil society on climate change noted that this is problematic because response is at the far end of the disaster risk management cycle. One of them argued: "Policy makers learn from the media for policy direction… this explains why politicians focus on responding to disasters to look good both in the news and in society."

These findings agree with the empirical evidence at hand that politics and funding issues are key drivers of policy making. The studies include that of Pardoe et al (2019) and Pelling and Holloway (2006) who found that political influences and political context, respectively, shape policy making. The difference with the empirical evidence is that this study finds the issue of funding and its centrality to the OPC bringing in a new dimension to how politicians have easy access to government resources, beating the common bureaucracies, to influence the practice of DRR.

This study argues that such societal pressures for politicians to "look good" in the media [40] under the bedrock of centralized institutional structures shape a wider view of development communication as information provision. With such a view, the study argues that policy actors in Malawi assume that local communities are ignorant of disaster risk management. The actors assume further that lack of information on DRR is one of the reasons that have left communities more vulnerable to climate shocks. For the policy makers, one of the strategies to deal with this ignorance is through information dissemination through the mass media.

Prevalence of health communication

The study has also established that the prevalence of health

communication in Malawi which uses social and behavior change communication (SBCC) approaches has shaped DRR communication to focus on information provision. Some of the challenges affecting Malawi, apart from disasters, include health related problems such as high population growth and high prevalence of HIV/Aids. For example, Malawi has one of the highest fertility rates of 4.13 children per woman This high population is plagued by HIV pandemic. Statistics indicate that at least 33 000 people contract the virus (that causes Aids) every year while 13 000 succumb to it (The Malawi National Aids Commission, Malawi National Strategic Plan for HIV and Aids 2020-2025). Such challenges have seen State and non-State actors use SBCC approaches to upscale use of family planning methods to control child birth; and to promote use of condoms and general behavior change as measures against the spread of HIV and Aids.

With the increase of disasters, communication specialists have replicated the same approaches in disaster management. A renowned communication specialist in Malawi buttresses this point. He said: "If you look at the way disasters are happening, there are a number of aspects that require application of social and behavior change approaches to increase the level of understanding on disasters…and change behaviours". For him, adoption of 'good behaviour' in disaster management leads to disaster resilience. The importance of SBCC is also reinforced by some higher academic institutions such as Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences (MUBAS) which have introduced full postgraduate degrees on SBCC.

This factor was not established by other literature under review in this study. This makes it a novel finding and unique to Malawi mostly because of the country's prevalence of HIV/Aids that makes it one of hardest hit countries in Southern Africa.

Why is participatory communication approach featuring in more recent DRR communication strategies?

The third finding is that recent DRR policies and strategies have tilted towards participatory communication. Five of the respondents agree that there are two reasons for this. First is that the increase of disasters in frequency and magnitude has also prompted policy actors to shift in policy direction from response to risk reduction which demands community engagement. Second is that the local policies are modeled on international frameworks to align with the global thinking. These two factors, however, are interrelated as they feed into each other.

A senior officer at DoDMA explained that one of the examples that have seen disaster events effecting policy change is the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004. He said the event triggered a lot of international aid, but the impact of such a response did not address the underlying causes of vulnerability. This led to global change in policy direction with the development of the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters. Locally, it is within the same period that Malawi developed and aligned the DRM Policy (2015 - 2020) and its attendant communication policy to the Hyogo Framework. In spite of this new development, another

officer at DoDMA noted that the local policies are still wanting in some other aspect. For example, he explained that the Hyogo Framework expired in 2015 and the world is now using the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 which has incorporated new concepts of DRR. He noted that Malawi's DRM Policy of 2015, for instance, was approved a month before the Sendai Framework came into force, which means Malawi is still stuck with an old framework. He argued: "This simply shows that the policy we have is not in tandem with the global agenda [40].

The finding on how disaster events have shaped policy in Malawi agrees with the existing body of literature on how occurrence of disasters provoked DRR legislative reforms in Sri Lanka and India (Pelling and Holloway, 2006). The authors note that India's disaster legislation was oriented towards response, relief and recovery. But it was until a cyclone struck India in 1999 and an earthquake hit one of its cities in 2001 that the Indian government shifted towards "a more-dimensional approach and incorporate risk reduction in development plans" (Pelling and Holloway, 2006: 10).

However, it is the view of this study that the influence of international community weighs more than mere increase in disasters. The common denominator though is the shift in policy direction. Another layer of argument this study offers is that this shift in policy is devoid of factoring in prevalent Malawi's local conditions such as perpetual poverty and incessant food insecurity that have deepened due to the occurrence of disasters. For example, the Water Resources Act of 2012 prohibits cultivation or any activity within the bed and banks of watercourse and their adjacent land strips stretching up to 25 metres to reduce disaster risk. Yet the Agriculture Policy (2010) advocates winter cropping along river banks through use of irrigation pumps to achieve food security. The conflicting policies simply shows that international policies are localized without due diligence to local exigencies such as the perpetual food insecurity and poverty.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Implication of the findings: Theory, policy and practice

From the above findings, the study argues that the media and health communication have had a major impact on DRR communication in Malawi. This is drawn from testimonies by senior officials at DoDMA that it was until 2015 that the department had its first PR/communication officer following increased demand for information by the media. It is the view of this study that this shaped policy makers to think that development communication is about information provision; hence, seconding a PR officer, who is a journalist, from Ministry of Information to "source information from technocrats at DoDMA and pass it on to the public through the media" (DoDMA senior officer). In addition, the study makes this stance by drawing on evidence presented in the study that disaster affairs are centralized and that political influence and DRR funding are both modelled towards disaster response, relief and recovery.

Recommendations

Mainstreaming of indigenous knowledge systems into policy

The study faults information-based approaches in DRR, arguing that resilience does not happen with information provision alone. The study argues that the message-based approaches are modernist and orientalist, rooted in the dominant modernisation paradigm and its attendant diffusionist communication approaches which assume that culture and other traditional practices are inferior to "modern" [Western] practices of development. This is problematic. As such, the study recommends that if DRR is to bear fruit, communicators need to allow indigenous knowledge systems to flourish and refrain from marketing their own ideas to communities. Otherwise, as Manyozo (2017) argues, projects fail because communication specialists are interested in marketing their own ideas to communities instead of curating development together with local communities.

Address underlying factors of vulnerability through structural transformation

Apart from that, it needs to be noted that emphasis on information provision undermines the fact that the challenge of disasters is structural in nature which needs a multifaceted approach. Raising awareness about resettlement from disaster prone areas to safer or higher ground, as DoDMA envisages, is not enough. Neither is it enough to only give out early warnings about the impending disasters as MET does. This is too simplistic as it overlooks other factors such as poverty, rapid population growth and urbanization that force people to settle in disaster prone areas. It is the study's view, as Scott (2014) argues, that behavior change needs a broader transformation of the many complex social and political processes which determine individual's lives. In this case, it could be socio-economic transformative activities such as livelihood projects for poor families; creation of rural towns to deal with the problem of urbanization; and control of population growth by reducing child marriage. The study therefore recommends that policies and DRR communication strategies need to look beyond mere information provision, but rather to address the underlying factors of vulnerability.

Communication as the 'pedagogy of listening'

The study also recommends that structural transformation activities described above need to be grounded within the theory of participatory communication to create a critical mass of local communities who are conscientised and empowered to reflect on their problems and act upon them (Freire, 1970). This can only be achieved if the communication person performs the role of facilitator and not PR officer as is the case at DoDMA. Manyozo (2017) calls this "the pedagogy of listening", which he borrows from Freire's writings of 1996 that outline three forms of listening: listening to evidence, listening to ourselves and listening as a form of speaking. For Manyozo (2017), a development communication is merely a facilitator in the practice of development. It is the local communities who should take centre stage in designing, planning, and implementation of DRR activities.

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