

## The expert view: Messaging around disasters

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Interviewee: [Onengiyeofori Fyनेface](#): Head of English Desk, [African Union of Broadcasting](#) (AUB)

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**Ana:** Thank you for making the time to talk with us about your work and the Disasters Avoided initiative. Our aim is to share stories or case studies about disaster prevention and to collect a body of knowledge on actions taken around the world. We have an interest in messaging around disasters, and to that end we have been talking to journalists such as yourself.

Can we begin this interview with an overview of your background and experience, especially as it relates to reporting on disasters and related topics?

***Onengiyeofori:** My name is Onengiofori Fyनेface. I started my journalism career in 2009 with the Nigerian Television Authority, in one of the regional stations. My interest initially was in development journalism, so I literally gave myself the task of going to rural communities, talking about the other side of society that is hardly reflected in the media. And then in 2019, I was transferred to the headquarters in Abuja, where I eventually became head of the environment desk. In that capacity, I got engaged in a series of climate change and disaster storytelling and projects. I have a master's in development communication. I try to see that the passion I have for inclusive journalism reflects in my job as a climate and environment journalist.*

*In 2023, I joined the Africa Union of Broadcasting (AUB), as head of the Anglophone desk. The AUB has different desks (English, French, Arabic, Portuguese), who liaise with countries with each of those official languages, and then as journalists we write stories. AUB also has a distribution platform where members can share stories from their respective countries. Active members are primarily national broadcasters across Africa, but we also have participating members who are private organizations in Africa, and partners outside of Africa.*

*There, I moved fully into providing training for journalists on the continent. I'm still a journalist in the AUB, but my focus is no longer entirely on reporting, it is mostly on building capacity of our member organizations. So, I don't do as much reporting for international programmes and platforms like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Convention to Combat Decertification (UNCCD) COPS, and others.*

**Ana:** One of our key areas of focus has been communicating to the public that disasters are not caused by the hazard or climate change, they are about human decisions that directly create or put people in a vulnerable situation. Indeed, [our definition of a disaster](#) is deliberately simple (whilst appreciating that more detailed definitions exist): A major situation requiring outside support for coping.

Do you have any thoughts or experience with this type of messaging, including in the African context, where you work?

**Onengiyeofori:** *I would like to answer from a religious perspective. In this part of the world, the sense of religious consciousness is still very strong, probably because of the challenges we have in terms of political development, economic, social and perhaps scientific advancements. There is a tendency to say that whatever happens, it is because God wants it, and it is beyond human control. And that concept creates a certain mindset that is reflected even in the practice of journalism.*

*So, people tend to believe that disasters are natural. We understand, of course, that there are predictable triggers, but the impact is worsened by factors like urban planning, failures, weak infrastructure, poverty, etc. Disasters, of course, are not natural. Hazards could be, and in most cases are natural. If the necessary action and information around the hazards is diffused to people, it may result in a certain degree of damage where there is no resilient infrastructure, but elsewhere the disaster will be mitigated, if not avoided completely.*

*I'll give an example, the Mozambique cyclone in 2019. We could say that the storm itself was natural, but the flooding from the storm was linked eventually to deforestation. Deforestation is not natural; it's a human activity. There were also unplanned settlements, which are not natural. People decided to develop without paying attention to proper urban planning or respecting the right of way of water. So, when the excess of water came, rather than freely flow through a bigger river or the sea, it was trapped, and flooding occurred. In addition, for reasons best known to those in charge at the time, the warning messages were not delivered to the people in time for them to take the needed action.*

*So the media has to shift the public mindset from that sense of helplessness and the mentality that it is in the hand of God, to the point of being accountable and prepared. If we as media practitioners focus more on telling people what they can do, what they ought to do, what they should do, they will come to understand that through early preparation they can either avert or in worst case scenarios minimize the impacts of hazards when they occur*

*There is one small flash flood somewhere and people will say this is climate change. And nobody talks about the fact that you have excess of pavements without proper planning for water to flow. Nobody talks about the opportunities in nature-based solutions. Nobody talks about greening. Journalists are often tempted to also follow the line of thought that whatever happens is a result of climate change, giving people the impression that there is nothing they can do about the situation.*

*Part of what we do at AUB is to train people to understand the difference, to train our reporters and media practitioners to understand the difference so that in their reporting they don't always present these phenomena as situations that are beyond human control, because indeed they are within human control. That is why there are opportunities for planning.*

*The scientific community isn't always very helpful. I remember when I was still at the NTA (Nigerian Television Authority), the Nigerian Meteorological Agency would release warnings about dust storms. I would reach out to the same agency to say, look, we have talked about this dust storm, but the information in the press release is confusing, even for me as a journalist. Can you explain to me what is a dust storm? How does it operate? How does it move? How does it affect the villager? In a community contiguous to the desert, what are the health implications? What measures can we take? What are the problems to anticipate? And the response would be oh, sorry, I'm not cleared to grant any interviews, only my director general can talk about this. So, you wait for the director general for the next 2, 3, or 4 months, but by then the damage has been done. So that type of information is often missing, and science organizations see the media like microphones or amplifiers, whether the information is impactful or not.*

*We are trying through our trainings, with a lot of support from UNDRR, to build the capacity of our people to investigate some of these gaps. Rather than just cover the aftermaths of disasters we are helping our member organizations to see disaster reporting as a continuous exercise, and to talk more about what can be avoided if certain actions are taken. There are a lot of organizations involved in climate change and disaster risk communication, but most of their planning is tilted towards engaging the media during events and to give their point of view on events after they have happened, and not much is being done to talk about preparedness.*

*I had a discussion with an environmental health expert who told me that if you go to the hospital because you have malaria, the doctor will give you medication to treat the symptoms. You will feel better. But if you go back to your home where the environment is still infested with mosquitoes, they will bite again, the malaria will come again, you will return to the doctor. So rather than continue in that circle of spending money and going to the doctor, why not spend money to keep the environment clean?*

*Any efforts that can be made or are being made to promote prevention and preparedness are welcome. I believe that is where the world should go and the focus of journalism practice in Africa. So, we train our members to understand that we continually talk about preparedness. Of course, when hazardous events manifest, we still report them. The cycle only concludes when you're able to go back to see how people are recovering from the disasters. This is a major thrust for us in AUB, despite the problems being rooted deep in factors that are beyond our control, like the political, religious, and economic factors I mentioned earlier.*

*To provide an example, the Nigeria Hydrological Services Agency (NIHSA) is responsible for monitoring the hydrological year, and especially the Niger and Benue rivers.*

*NIHSA issues warnings and sends information to federal, state and local governments, such as the ministries of environment and water resources and local councils, informing them of the predicted water height and magnitude. Because it is generally too late for mitigation, overwhelmed communities are told to relocate to higher ground, protect their belongings from being robbed, and so forth. Instead of acting, state and local governments wait to respond with palliatives and relief materials. Why? Because that's where the money is. For example, they might take a million naira to provide maybe a million mattresses but only actually deliver 300.000. They wait until disasters overwhelm communities to justify financial requests for relief materials from funding partners in the name of providing to people.*

*I am always against handing out humanitarian aid. If funding were not available, maybe people would think more about how to avoid disasters due to a given hazard. Instead, they mostly think of which agency to approach for funding. So rather than the U.S. for instance providing \$10 billion in response to flooding in Nigeria, why not provide for example \$15 billion to build the capacity of government agencies and institutions and the media and communities to properly manage flooding?*

**Ana:** Could you tell us a little more about your training activities for African journalists, as it relates to reporting about disasters?

**Onengiyeofori:** *The process of building the capacity of journalists is the first step, and some are already showing change and improvement in the way they tell their stories, because when they know better, they're able to guide society better. It might not be radical, but gradually some of these attitudes can be changed through constant reporting. By telling the other side of the story, taking it from another angle, gradually people will see that they too have a role to play and that not everything is in the hands of God.*

*We have two ongoing trainings now. One is to build the capacity of the media in small island developing states (SIDS) supported by UNESCO. We're piloting in South Tome and Principe, Cabo Verde, Mauritius and Comoros, two Francophone and two Lusophone countries. First, we train journalists on disaster reporting. Here, there's usually a producer to guide the process. We also support media organizations in developing reports on disaster preparedness and response plans at an institutional level and creating a tripartite relationship between the media, the media regulatory agencies and the scientific community, such as the national emergency management agencies or forecasting agencies.*

*I am also mentoring the participants in developing a standard operating procedure so that if there's a cyclone somewhere, how do you cover it? From the point when the forecast is released to when the cyclone happens, to the point when people are recovering from the effects of the cyclone, so that journalists can improve their reporting on disasters before, during and after.*

*The other program we have is on media and information literacy, supported by UNESCO; plus we have a running initiative with UNDRR called Media Saving Lives Initiative, which includes support for media organizations to cover international events such as the recent Global Platform in Geneva.*

**Ana:** Have you had any experiences conveying positive stories of disasters avoided and if yes, what challenges did you encounter? Was there any pushback? We are wondering if there are ways that we can increase public appetite for these stories, so they can become an effective means of knowledge sharing that leads to positive change? Whilst there are examples of proactive action and upfront planning to avoid disasters ([we document some of them through the Disasters Avoided initiative](#)), there is much more that could be done.

**Onengiyeofori:** *Yes, people don't seem to value success. If somebody wakes up in the morning and they are healthy, with no medical conditions to worry about, they most likely take good health for granted. If that same individual were to fall critically sick and recover from that sickness, they will appreciate good health because they are just recovered from sickness. That is what happens in the disaster space where there are no disasters. It is only when something bad has happened that we appreciate the intensity of what has happened. So, when people take action or do things to promote positive attitudes to prevent disasters, it doesn't always sell much. It doesn't attract much attention. If an organization or an institution, for instance, decides to clean the drains in a community so that there'll be no blockage or flooding when it rains, that act could just be seen as a publicity stunt. Because in the minds of many people that is usual and commonplace. But if it is raining and flooding and somebody comes with a bulldozer to clear a blocked channel and then the flood water is dissipated, it will be appreciated more.*

*Often when we have our training sessions or sponsored coverages, we advise journalists to pay attention to success stories. What has country A or organization B done that is successful that can be replicated elsewhere? I believe that if we continue to prioritize success stories over time, the appreciation will come.*

**Ana:** I also have a question about urban environments. Are there disaster risk reduction activities that urban leaders should be focusing on where the media could play a role?

**Onengiyeofori:** *Well, I find that question very interesting because the urban population in Africa seems to be growing. And with growing population, there is also growing urban infrastructure development. Unfortunately, most of those developments come in the form of grey infrastructure that are not well planned. And so flood, heatwave and infrastructure collapse risk increase. We also have weak enforcement institutions and systems. For example, there was a building collapse somewhere in Lagos, Nigeria. Later, it was discovered that the owner of the structure built a greater number of floors than in the approved plan, so this amended plan went through without the proper regulatory process.*



*The entire building collapsed and several people died. We are not aware of any prosecution since the collapse, even though regulators go on TV to say they will do whatever it takes to prosecute all those responsible.*

*And the next thing we know, another building collapses. Enforcement and the political will to take action is lacking. A politician can put up a structure on a flood plain or on the waterway, but because he is a member of the ruling party or has a lot of political clout, nobody will stop him. Weak government and political systems are not helping matters. I believe that some of these problems could be solved if our funding partners channelled their resources to build strong institutions in Africa, and not necessarily interventions in infrastructure. If the World Bank gives a country in Africa say \$100 million for a road project, to me that is useless unless the World Bank first strengthens the transparency of the government of that country so it can effectively utilize the funds.*

*The capacity to even recognize these problems and provide the required solutions are also missing. The role of the media is more about changing mindsets. If people involved and journalists do not understand that through small steps, they can achieve this, we will continue to report the problems and ignore the root causes and the solutions. The media, as a matter of fact, needs to highlight urban resiliency plans, promoting and projecting successful examples in other countries. If I'm doing a story about how to prevent flooding and I'm able to refer to a neighbouring country or a country in another continent that has adopted a model that worked, that will go a long way to allow people to understand what is possible.*

*The truth is that national broadcasters are funded directly by a Ministry of Government. So, if someone appoints you as an envoy somewhere and they tell you this is what we want you to say, are you able in that context now to criticise the same person that appointed you? It's really difficult. But even in that context, in that difficult situation, we still have had cases where the media has held governments to account. For example, if someone is a thief, you might not outright say to this minister, you have stolen. But you can talk about integrity and honesty and transparency in governance, without necessarily directly pointing to that person. When it comes to matters that affect human life, national assets, or property, we cannot afford to continually fold our arms and do nothing. We also encourage our reporters and our members to hold people accountable for their actions.*

*In our place we have a popular saying that if your mother is a trader in the market, don't throw stones into the market because you don't know when you will hit your own mother. We are not even aware of actions we take that are causing damage to ourselves. People need to be held accountable for those actions. People need to be told that certain practices are not good for them. Part of what I do in my reporting and trainings is to promote this awareness that we the people are part of the problem.*

*Through a focus on solutions-based journalism and telling success stories, we can promote good examples and achieve changes, albeit gradual. My mantra, as far as disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management is concerned, is that all stakeholders, including the media, governments, regulators, scientific organizations, and NGOs need to consciously move from where we are now, which is mostly reporting and talking after disasters, to engaging prior to the damage.*

*Then, we will be able to prevent most of these problems or natural hazards from becoming disasters that result in the loss of lives and property that we witness on the continent.*

**Ana:** Thank you very much for your time and your observations, Onengiyeofori.