

Food, Migration and Climate Change: The Untold Story



Investing in rural people

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Climate change is among the greatest threats to face humanity. Already scientists are calculating that 2015 has seen the hottest six months on record.¹ The number of storms, droughts and floods has increased threefold over the last three decades with devastating effects on some of the most vulnerable communities,² particularly the more than 70 per cent of the world's poorest who live in rural areas of developing countries and depend on agriculture for their survival. While future forecasts vary from 25 million to 1 billion environmental migrants by 2050,³ it is clear that today people are on the move because of climate change. Recent reports show failed crops, ailing livestock and localized conflicts over resources are driving rural people of the Sahel northward to flee poverty.⁴ And climate change, which an independent report⁵ commissioned by members of the G7, refers to as a "threat multiplier" to national security, has been blamed as one of the variables for the recent surge of refugees and migrants into Europe.

"Food, Migration and Climate Change: The Untold Story" is a research report prepared for presentation to international media attending the 21st session of the Conference of Parties (COP21) climate talks in Paris. The report is commissioned by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), a specialized United Nations agency and international financial institution that invests in rural people, empowering them to reduce poverty, increase food security, improve nutrition and strengthen resilience. The research was carried out by Sam Dubberley, Director of Kishnish Media Ltd., with the research assistance of Vincent Goubet.

The aim of the report is to provide an analysis of the depth of media reporting around climate change. Specifically, the report studies whether issues connecting climate change, food security, agriculture and migration were reported and if so, how much prominence stories were given. It asks what power voices were heard throughout the stories and if farmers or migrants themselves had a voice. And finally, it looks at what news readers understand about food and migration-related climate change impacts and their impression of media coverage provided.

The research includes an analysis of the content of news stories across eight news outlets considered to be among the most popular and influential in France and the United Kingdom. The news analysis was followed by interviews with focus groups comprised of news consumers in these two countries. Content analysed included the main news bulletins of the **BBC** and **Channel 4** in the

¹ <http://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/201510>

² http://www.publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migration_and_environment.pdf

³ http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2008/climate_forced_migration.pdf

⁴ <http://www.voanews.com/content/sahel-social-development/3060142.html>

⁵ <https://www.newclimateforpeace.org/#report-top>

United Kingdom and **TF1** and **France 2** in France, as well as front pages of print editions of **The Guardian** and **Daily Mail** in the United Kingdom and **Le Monde** and **Libération** in France. The research was conducted over a two-week period in September 2015.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

Key principal findings from the analysis were:

- **While there is a rich variety of climate stories reported, these stories were few and far between on the front pages or main television news bulletins analysed and when asked, news consumers say they don't know where else to go to find them.** In the period covered, not one newspaper reviewed mentioned climate change on its front page. Television bulletins fared better – with five stories over the four broadcasters reviewed. However, these stories focused primarily on domestic issues and did not report on agriculture-related impacts, such as on small-scale farmers in developing countries – one of the biggest demographics hit by climate change. Instead, when climate change impacts were linked to the developing world, they focused on the tourist industry. The audience noted this, saying: *"The broadsheets, you can get the articles there [on climate change] that go in depth – providing you can find them. They certainly won't be front page."*
- **News consumers did not believe that major media helped them understand climate change and, in particular, that a connection exists between climate change and issues such as agricultural failure, food insecurity, conflict and migration from developing countries.** Stories on climate change broadcast in the period researched did not report on such links or impacts on the general population, focusing predominantly on information being released from scientific institutions or governments. In the focus groups, the participants in both the United Kingdom and France did not perceive the media as helping them connect the idea of climate change with broader food security and migration trends from developing countries. In particular, this was reflected in the stories of the refugee crisis in the content analysis. Of the stories about migration that gave a reason for migration, 62 per cent mentioned the Syrian conflict as the cause without searching deeper.
- **Editorial decisions made by news organizations and editors have a direct impact on audience views and beliefs about climate change.** News consumers tend to repeat the mainstream news agenda when asked to produce their own news stories on climate change. For example, when asked to play the 'news game', a research tool that asks participants to recreate news stories as if they were journalists (see methodology section for more), focus group participants picked stories that repeated the editorial decisions of the news bulletins they referenced. When asked why, one participant noted that: *"I was thinking about what the media puts out, not what I thought was important to have in the news bulletin,"* stating that, *"it reflects back what we've seen previously, and then when you're in the driving seat to do it, you do that."* When pushed on failing to include stories about agriculture, migration and climate change in their own news bulletins, people noted that *"It isn't a top news story."*

- **News consumers believe climate change-related impacts need to be taken more seriously by news organizations and given higher prominence.** Although climate change coverage may have appeared in other newspaper sections, during the reporting period not one of the newspapers reviewed featured the issue on its front page. Throughout the focus group interviews, there was a near-universal demand that news organizations give climate-related issues higher prominence and offer solution-driven reporting which, they believed, is not available currently. They perceived reporting on climate change to be either over-dramatic or boring and not focused on helping the public contribute to solutions to problems. This was emphasized in one conversation in focus group 7 in France: *(Julie) "Reporting on climate change is frequently exaggerated, it panics people, instead of helping find solutions, even small solutions, which could change the daily behaviour of each of us."* *(Serge) "It's preferable to start with small solutions than starting by criticizing huge catastrophes. We can't do anything about huge catastrophes."*
- **Those on the front lines directly impacted by climate change rarely have a voice or are mentioned in stories.** Of the five television bulletins about climate change in the period of analysis, not one focused on individuals impacted by climate change. Instead, reporting concentrated on institutions, interviewing academics and climate change specialists. Focus group participants argued that news organizations need to make the stories and the impact of climate change more about people and individuals – not about institutions. This was emphasized by Roger from focus group 1 (the UK): *"I think [news organizations] should have a position. I think there are a huge number of people out there who couldn't care less if there are polar bears or not. They are much more worried about if there's going to be a bit of food on the plate. I think the media should be more high-profile about climate change and a bit more honest about what's going on. I think an awful lot of it is not being talked about."*

FOOD, MIGRATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The content analysis of the two-week period of media output in September 2015 highlights the small quantity of reporting on climate change in the media selected. Although researchers acknowledge that some media outlets likely did report on climate change (The Guardian newspaper in the UK, for instance, ran special reports on climate change), the goal of the research was to look at front page or "headline" stories that would have the most impact and visibility for audiences.

As Robert noted in focus group 3 in the UK: *"The broadsheets, you can get the articles there that go in depth – providing you can find them. They certainly won't be front page."* The content analysis conducted here illustrates that view.

The two-week period chosen for the content analysis coincided with the peak of what has been called “the refugee crisis” – that is, the large number of refugees and migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Syria entering or attempting to enter into the European Union from Turkey and North Africa, and the crisis this caused in Croatia, Greece, Serbia and at the Hungarian border. This clearly had an impact on the number of stories on migration in this period – both in television and in newspaper coverage. As can be seen in Table 1, the number of stories about migration outstripped both stories on climate change and on agriculture or food security in developing countries more generally.

When disaggregated by platform and country, the French media covered more climate change stories, but only in television reporting as is illustrated in Table 2. On newspaper front pages climate change was not covered in the two weeks analysed.

Table 1

<i>Stories</i>	<i>Total</i>
Climate change	5
General farming	3
Smallholder farming in developing countries	0
Migration	154

In the UK media (see Table 3), neither climate change nor stories on food security or farming in any form were reported by the media outlets studied. Migration, as in the French media, was at the forefront of reporting concerns.

What is the potential impact of this? As Richard notes above, those who want to find the in-depth articles on climate change can find them. But news consumers who do not wish to look for this content will not – in other words, a broader understanding of the issues among general audiences is unlikely. In French focus group 5, it was noted that, while there is specialist media available to those particularly interested in learning about climate change and its impacts, not everyone will find it. (*Pierre*) “A person who hasn’t studied much, or doesn’t get out of home much, they are not going to make the link between these kinds of issues.” (*Armelle*) “I know loads of people whose heads this just goes over.”

As Laura in group 2, in the UK, noted that climate change was too often only reported around an event. *“It’s hard to have a news story that’s in the public eye 24 hours a day, seven days a week, a lot of things happen in the world. So, you can only have climate change in the news when something has happened. You only see it when there’s loss of human life or when there’s been a discovery.”* The group went on to say that they would rather have stories on climate change that were not just focused on events or loss of life – rather looking at positive solutions to the issue of climate change.

Table 2

<i>Stories in French media</i>	<i>TF1</i>	<i>France 2</i>	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>Libération</i>
Climate change	3	2	0	0
Farming	2	0	0	1
Migration	27	42	8	5

Focus group participants did not consider that mainstream media consumption helped them to understand the possibility of any connection existing between climate change, agricultural failure and migration from rural areas in developing countries. Stories on climate change broadcast in the period researched did not report on such links or impacts on the general population, focusing predominantly on scientific institutions or governments when talking of climate change.

Table 3

<i>Stories in the UK media</i>	<i>BBC</i>	<i>Channel 4</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>
Climate change	0	0	0	0
Farming	0	0	0	0
Migration	26	34	10	8

In the focus groups, the participants in both countries did not perceive the media as helping them connect the idea of climate change with agricultural failure and migration from rural areas. This was reflected in the stories of the refugee crisis in the content sample. Of the stories about migration in the period covered that gave a reason for migration, all reported the cause of migration as being the Syrian conflict or conflict in general. No other reason for migration was offered.

This was reflected in focus group comments. As Marc in focus group 7 (a French group) noted: *"They [the media] talk about migration, about immigration, but it's rarely got anything to do with famine. Years ago, when we spoke about Ethiopia, we weren't talking about Ethiopian migration. When we talk about migration, we talk about Africans arriving in France, but we never talk about why. Even if it has something to do with famine, the media will never represent it that way."* Joan in focus group 3 in the UK echoed this, noting that: *"You have a huge coverage of the number of people in Kos, you get a massive coverage of that, but not a lot on what's the driving force. And when the driving force is mentioned, it's more about conflict."*

These observations from the focus groups are despite the fact that research has stated that one of the many catalysts for the conflict in Syria was climate change and food shortage. Gleick, for instance, states that, "The focus of the conflict is regime change, but the triggers include (...) challenges associated with climate variability and change and the availability and use of freshwater."⁶ This is backed up by Kelley et al. who argue that, "Before the Syrian uprising that began in 2011, the greater Fertile Crescent experienced the most severe drought in the instrumental record. For Syria, a country marked by poor governance and unsustainable agricultural and environmental policies, the drought had a catalytic effect, contributing to political unrest."⁷

As Hannah in focus group 1 noted: *"I hear climate change more portrayed about crop failure, but migration is all about war. It has been for some time. The media does nothing about portraying climate change as a very significant and very important part of that. There's also the potential of food insecurity and food poverty to cause conflict, they're not separate, but I definitely don't think you hear about that in the media."*

Also important to note is the focus of stories that report about climate change and farming. Stories about climate change all focus on institutions, not individuals being impacted by climate change. Voices heard in reporting were those of scientists, academics, or specialists representing institutions, not individuals impacted directly by climate change. This is highlighted in Table 4 which shows that the main voice heard in stories on climate change and farming

⁶ Gleick, P. H., 2014. "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria". *Weather, Climate and Society*, 6, 331-340. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1175/WCAS-D-13-00059.1>

⁷ Kelley, C. et al, 2015. "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought", *Proceedings of the National Academy of the United States*, vol. 112 no. 11, 3241-3246

was what Corner and Richardson call “expert” advice, not “ordinary” advice. They state, “the coverage of many environmental topics requires the testimony of experts, the voice of science (and technology) to explain the complexity of cause-effect relationships.”⁸ But, without the voice of the individual impacted, it’s then difficult for the audience to understand what is truly happening in the case of climate change. They continue, “The role of the ordinary person, particularly in programming dealing with the consequences of particular events is extremely important. Lay accounts can offer a density that scientific abstraction cannot match, as viewers hear about, and also see, the crops that failed, the animals that starved.”⁹

This view was repeated in the focus groups. As Marie, again from focus group 7 in France noted in a discussion of the results of the news game: *“I didn’t choose to include interviews in my bulletin because I think it’s too serious and, I don’t think, the right message to pass on to people. We’re beyond that, in fact. Images are much more powerful than an interview with Mr X or Mrs Y expert to pass on a message.”*

Focus group participants tended to repeat the mainstream news agenda when asked to produce their own news stories on climate change during the interviews. While playing the news game, they picked stories that repeated the editorial decisions of the news bulletins they referenced.

Table 4

<i>Stories</i>	<i>Focus on governments, agencies, NGOs or scientific institutions</i>	<i>Focus on Individuals</i>
Climate change	5	0
Farming	2	0
Migration	63	91

This discussion between two members of focus group 2 in the UK illustrates this:

Laura: *“We found it hard to approach it without thinking about what will sell, not what we want to put in it.”*

Richard: *“That’s right, I was thinking about what the media puts out, not what I thought was important to have in the news bulletin.”*

⁸ Corner J., and K. Richardson, 1994. “Environmental Communication and the Contingency of Meaning: A Research Note” in *Media Texts and Representations* in Hansen op cit. p. 160

⁹ Ibid, p. 163

Richard went on to explain further: *"We instinctively chose what we thought was going to be top billing, rather than what we thought should have the main focus on it – and I can see that we've done something very similar to the other groups. It reflects back what we've seen previously, and then when you're in the driving seat to do it, you do that, that's how it felt."*

In another thread during the same focus group, Oliver explained his group's choice of images for a news story on climate change by noting that: *"It's common to see pictures of icebergs in the news, so we put it in."*

Comments like this reflect the power and influence that editorial choices and placement can have over readers and the risk that complexities and opportunities for deeper understanding on issues may be lost. For example, when thinking about climate change and reporting and, by extension, thinking about how to cover climate change issues themselves, the news-consuming audience tended to repeat what they have seen – choosing similar stories and replicating the content that the mainstream media publishes. And this happened despite the audience knowing or being aware that the same images and same stories are being used again and again by the media. As Graham from focus group 1 said: *"I smiled when I saw the polar bear, as it was called the hackneyed picture of climate change the other day."* Despite the belief that the image of the polar bear was hackneyed, it was still chosen by the groups in the news game.

Across the news-consuming audience groups interviewed for this report, there was a near-universal demand for reporting on solutions to climate change. They perceived reporting on climate change to be either over dramatic or boring, and not focused on helping the public contribute to solutions to problems.

Following the news game, the focus groups moved on to questions about how they felt news organizations should report on climate change. The belief was that the issue needed to be taken more seriously by news organizations and given a higher prominence. Furthermore, they argued that news organizations needed to make the stories and the impact of climate change more about people and individuals – not about institutions.

This was emphasized by Roger from focus group 1.

"I think [news organizations] should have a position. I think there are a huge number of people out there who couldn't care less if there are polar bears or not. They are much more worried about if there's going to be a bit of food on the plate. I think the media should be more high-profile about climate change and a bit more honest about what's going on. I think an awful lot of it is not being talked about."

The content analysis supports Roger's view. As already noted above, there were only five stories about climate change in the period of analysis and not one of

those stories focused on individuals impacted by climate change, rather they focused on institutions, interviewing academics and climate change specialists, not individuals impacted by climate change. It's also noteworthy that of the five stories in the period, two were overseas reports.

This was also a point made in a conversation in focus group 2 in the UK.

Laura: *"There's not much about the individual in reporting on climate change. It'd be great if there were more personal stories, so you could understand how it impacts individuals."*

Richard: *"You're right, it's just numbers, it's just figures – it's not people with families and parents and the rest of it."*

The news-consumers participating in the focus groups clearly saw a need for the media to place stories about climate change more predominantly in their publishing and to make their reporting on climate change about individuals. While it is the case that many news organizations do in-depth reporting on climate change, a bigger issue was how easy this reporting was to find.

This was underlined by Robert in group 3. Robert noted that in *"the broadsheets [newspapers], you can get the articles that go in depth – providing you can find them. They certainly won't be front page."*

Another demand from the focus groups was for the media to make reporting on climate change more engaging. *"I guess I don't blame [the media],"* said Charlie in focus group 4 in the UK. *"No breaking news happens in climate change, it's a very slow process, I suppose. Research comes out, and that's very boring."*

In group 5, in France, a discussion ensued about how the media should be positive and constructive in reporting on climate change and help the audience feel that they should do something.

Maximillian: *"They [the media] need to be more positive"*

Jean Philip: *"Yes, they need to give us some hope"*

Nathalie: *"Leave you thinking, when you switch off the tele, not 'shit', but rather tomorrow, I'm going to try that"*

Thomas *"Without forgetting what's happening"*

Jean Philip *"To put new initiatives at the top"*

Nathalie *"And to make things more positive".*

News organizations investing more time in what Ulrich Haagerup, the executive director of news at Danish Public Television calls "constructive news" could be a solution. As Haagerup states: "Readers, listeners and viewers in the millions are turning their backs on traditional media, and I have found that one of the reasons for the fundamental crisis is that people are sick and tired of the negative picture of the world presented to them by the press. Most news stories

in traditional media are angled on conflict, drama, crooks and victims.”¹⁰ The focus group participants were certainly looking for more engaging, positive solutions. Mixing the positive with the ongoing work on climate change and solutions to food security and migration threats such as helping poor farmers mitigate the impact of climate change or lobbying for better government policies, audiences could become more engaged with the issues at hand. This is certainly something audiences were calling for in the focus groups that were conducted. As Thomas noted in group 5. *“It’s always the same thing. I understand that migration could be caused by climate change, by malnutrition. But what I want is for the media to tell me what I can do about it. What I can do about it as an individual.”*

METHODOLOGY

Data collection for this research project took two forms.

First, content analysis conducted on eight influential news outlets with large audiences in the United Kingdom and France from August 31 until September 13 2015. The goal was to look at when, how much, and within what parameters news organizations – both print and broadcast – reported on issues linking climate change to food security, agriculture and migration.

In France, the research analysed the content of the main evening news broadcasts of TF1 and France 2. These are broadcast daily at 8 p.m. local time. We also coded the front pages of the newspapers Le Monde and Libération in the same time period. In the UK, we coded the main evening news broadcast of the BBC – the News at Ten – and the main evening news broadcast of Channel 4. We also coded the front pages of The Guardian and the Daily Mail.

The eight news outlets were chosen because they are considered as being amongst the most popular and influential both in terms of quality, reach and audience numbers. The coding dates were chosen because there was no particular climate change “news hook” which could have had the possibility of skewing the results to show a greater editorial interest in climate change stories than habitually exists. We chose a period not in the summer season – often dubbed “the silly season” in the news industry – and we wanted to choose a period with an acceptable time distance from the COP21 meeting in Paris in order for previews and so on not to skew the data. The first two weeks of September 2015 were at the end of the summer, and three months from the COP21 meeting.

The front pages of the newspapers were selected because these pages are the most impactful in the publications in question. It is clear that, if we had wanted to, we could have found more specialist, specific articles about the content we

¹⁰ Haagerup, U., 2014. “Constructive News”. Cologne: InnoVatio Publishing AG

were looking for, however, the goal was to be generalist in our approach and analyse the content that has the broadest impact.

Once collected, the content was coded using predefined characteristics that correlated with the objective of understanding how many stories covering climate change, migration and farming are reported, what power voices are heard, if general voices are heard or only those of power, and whether issues concerning climate change, migrants and food security are raised. The coding was conducted to draw a general picture of reporting on the issues targeted in the research.

Second, following the content analysis phase, eight focus groups were conducted – four in the UK and four in France.

The eight focus groups had a total of 37 participants, whose ages ranged from 21 to 72. They were conducted between July and November 2015. Twenty-one participants were men, 16 were women. This slight imbalance is due to non-shows to group meetings or difficulties in recruitment.

All participants were chosen on the basis of having an active interest in the news (the criterion for recruitment was that they engaged with at least one form of news publication every day, i.e. television, online, newspapers). In all cases, groups were designed to be broadly representative of the 'interpretive communities' in which people might typically discuss news stories (Kitzinger, 2004: 174).¹¹ In every instance, recruitment took place via an intermediary known to a member of the research team. Intermediaries were given details of the eligibility criterion.

The groups in the UK were moderated by Sam Dubberley and the groups in France were moderated by research assistant Vincent Goubet. The groups in the UK took place in English, those in France took place in French. All participants were asked to agree to be recorded and, where necessary, quoted in the final report (all names have been changed to ensure participants' anonymity). Focus group discussions were recorded with telephones and transcribed by Sam Dubberley (English groups) and Vincent Goubet (French groups). Translation from French to English was carried out by Sam Dubberley.

All focus groups lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. They followed the same structure and were divided into three sections. They began with a modified version of the 'news game', a focus group exercise devised by the Glasgow Media Group that asks participants to assume the role of a journalist and actively construct their own news bulletin (for a full discussion of the news

¹¹ Kitzinger, J., 2004. "Audiences and Readership Research Approaches: A Survey", in J. D. H. Downing, D. McQuail, P. Schlesinger, and E. Wartella (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Media Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE Publications, 167-81

game, see Kitzinger, 1990).¹² In our version of the news game, participants were divided into small teams and given the following scenario:

“The G20 summit is taking place in Germany. The main topic of the conference is climate change. You are the main news producer of the channel’s evening news bulletin. This bulletin is considered the most high-brow news bulletin of your channel. Your editor has asked you to prepare the lead story of the day concerning the G20 summit on climate change. You have 3 minutes to fill and a range of options to choose from. You have correspondents offering stories, you have interview possibilities.”

Each team was given a folder containing information about the stories on offer. Each card contained fictional information about the specific story they could select for their bulletin, designed to stimulate discussion about the aspects reporting on climate change that interest us and which related to our research questions. Participants were then tasked with deciding which stories they would use in their news bulletin. On completion of the news game, each team was asked to present their bulletin to the group and then talk through their rationale for including/excluding stories.

Using the news game as a springboard for broader discussion, we then explored participants’ opinion of reporting about climate change, rural farming, food security and migration. The discussion then focused around five main areas:

1. What do you think about news reporting on climate change?
2. What do you think you learn from the media about climate change?
3. What do you expect from news organizations when they tell stories about climate change?
4. Do you think media organizations help you understand how and why migration is happening, why food security is a potential issue?
5. Does news reporting on climate change help you make a link between climate change, global food security and migration?

The goal of the focus groups was not to discover generalizations about the whole news-consuming population of either country. With four groups per country, such a goal was just not possible. What we were able to explore was attitudes to reporting on climate change, issues of rural farming and food security as well as migration amongst those who consume the news. Considering we quickly arrived at saturation – the point at which the research hears the same points raised in different groups – we can say this was achieved.

¹² Kitzinger J., 1990. “Audience Understandings of AIDS Media Messages: A Discussion of Methods”, *Sociology of Health and Illness*,12(3)

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