Media coverage of climate change and international development

Newspapers in the UK reflect a sense of climate change as an impending catastrophe for the developing world, which requires the help of the West. This view partly reinforces the concept of the poor as victims and could influence the public’s response to climate change policies.

The mass media is seen as an important source of information for the public about climate change, influencing public perceptions and understanding of the issues as well as government initiatives. For these reasons, the media can influence public support for policy development.

This study analysed media representations of climate change and international development to help show how views are constructed and reflected, and ultimately how policy actions will be received by the public. 158 articles from four ‘quality’ British newspapers published between 1997 and 2007 were investigated.

Articles were sorted according to eight different viewpoints: ranging from the view that climate change is beneficial, seeing climate change as an opportunity to help lift people out of poverty, right through to reporting that climate change is a disaster for developing countries.

In approximately one third of articles, climate change was portrayed as a potential catastrophe for development in poor countries. Other viewpoints were less common in the analysis but were present. A range of factors appeared to influence how climate change was reported, including:

- key events, such as the Kyoto summit and the publication of the findings of the IPCC in 2000/2001
- whether the newspapers sought a balanced view (for example, is it a crisis or can opportunities for development be identified?)
- the source of the stories (NGO reports or opinions featured heavily, scientific papers were rarely used as the basis for articles)
- wider political, social and economic factors, such as government actions

Developing countries and the poor were largely depicted as unfortunate victims of climate change who require urgent help from the rich West. Furthermore, differences between countries in the ‘developing world’ were not explored in the articles, nor the possible actions of the poor themselves to tackle climate change.

The fact that only 158 articles over 10 years focused on climate change and international development demonstrates the low priority given by UK newspapers to the impacts of climate change on developing countries. This has implications for shaping public understanding of the issue, which in turn could affect, to some degree, public policy.


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