

COMMUNICATING SUSTAINABILITY: THE APPARENT AND LATENT FEATURES OF ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING IN THE ZIMBABWEAN PRESS

By: TIGERE CHAGUTAH

**ABSTRACT**

The paper analyzes the apparent and latent features of environmental reporting in the Zimbabwean press. It argues for critical environmental reporting in the local press by foregrounding the worsening state of the natural environment across the country. Using two national weekly newspapers as sites of study, the paper discusses the complex web of organizational and extra-organizational forces, filters, and drivers that impact on environment news construction and determines the level and quality of coverage observed. The study establishes that for reasons including lack of competence of reporters, gatekeepers' discretion, and the commercial imperative of news organizations, environmental news competes less favorably with other specialty news categories for space in the local press. Environmental coverage is shown to be characterized by the significant use of highly illustrative visual images, including stand-alone pictures without adequate commentary or discussion. Much of environmental news coverage in the press is event-centered hard news, falling within the related frames of risk, uncertainty, fear, outrage, and crisis.

**Key words:** Environmental news reporting, media, sustainable development

**INTRODUCTION**

Despite the widely held belief that the media, as a critical enabler of sustainable development, acts as a bridge between the public, decision-makers, and those providing information on the country's ecosystems, a cursory look at the media in Zimbabwe reveals a dearth of coverage of environmental issues. Characterized by a preponderance of political and economic reporting, the media in Zimbabwe seldom give environmental news prominence. Globally, environmental issues have increasingly become

part of both the public and political agendas and are widely reported in the media. However, African media appears to lag behind in their efforts to give prominence to environmental issues. In the *Module on Specialized Reporting*, Mutere (1991) in (Boafo, 1991) concedes, "... environmental issues constitute a relatively marginal concern in most African newspapers, radio and television news, and current affairs programs. Much more attention is given to national politics, labor disputes, the arts, and business."

Revealing, perhaps, are the following excerpts from the prologue to the text *Media and Sustainable Development* by Okigbo (1995).

"The physical environment of Sub-Saharan Africa is prone to excessive abuse, but the political environment is even more abused... Though management of the physical environment is of paramount importance in any serious discussion of sustainable development, the political environment deserves equal, *if not more attention*," (Okigbo, 1995).

"Were the [African] media to be faced with the choice of covering either the natural or the political environment, they should, without any hesitation, choose the latter, for in the African context, the mismanagement of the political sphere is the more imminent calamity," (Okigbo, 1995).

This paper analyzes the apparent and latent features of environmental reporting in two leading Zimbabwean newspapers, *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* for the period May 1, 2005 to April 30, 2006. The paper rationalizes the argument for critical environmental reporting in the local press by foregrounding the worsening state of the biophysical environment across the country. Using the two prominent national weekly newspapers as sites of study, the paper discusses the complex web of organizational and extra-organizational forces, filters, and drivers that impact on environment news construction and determine the level of coverage observed.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

The natural environment represents an important reservoir of economic, social, and cultural resources for the people of Zimbabwe, yet it is currently suffering from unsustainable exploitation (Tsiko, 2010).

With the majority of Zimbabweans, both urban and rural alike, directly deriving their livelihoods from natural resource extraction, environmental sustainability is a major concern in the country.

In many parts of sub Saharan Africa, Zimbabwe included, the sustainability or capability of local communities to maintain acceptable standards of well being over a long period of time currently appears very hampered. This is mainly as most communities are constantly being faced with various natural and man-made environmental disasters, which continually prevent communities from engaging in actions that would foster a sustainable development over a long period of time (Sedgo & Somé, 2001). To arrest, and eventually reverse, this trend in order to reach and maintain a true state of sustainable development, there is a need for concrete actions to reduce the impact of these sudden and slow onset environmental disasters.

Among such concrete actions, public awareness in particular appears to be one of the viable alternatives to consider (Sedgo & Somé, 2001). Enhancing public awareness would be essential to increasing the knowledge, as well as preparedness of local communities, for dealing with most natural and man-made environmental disasters and in fostering cogent environmental stewardship among communities in Zimbabwe. However, despite evidence of widespread environmental degradation, the press in Zimbabwe has been less than enthusiastic in taking up environmental issues as a sustained category of reporting (Chagutah, 2006). Except in cases of sudden environmental catastrophe, environmental issues have lagged behind other societal concerns in establishing themselves on the media agenda.

The press is duty-bound to provide relevant, timely information on the state of the environment, educate society on good environmental stewardship, and promote sustainable practices. It should provide a bridge between the environmental experts, policy makers, and the public in efforts towards sustainable natural resource exploitation. To do this, however, coverage of environmental issues in the press has to increase in quantity and improve in quality.

### **Zimbabwe's biophysical environment**

Zimbabwe is the second most industrialized country in the southern African region, after South Africa (FAO, 2001). Economic development, industrialization, and urbanization in the past century have seen Zimbabwe transform from a completely rural society to a complex country whose ties to natural capital

remain strong across the rural-urban dichotomy. Most of the country's urban settlements are concentrated around areas of economic activity. Based on natural resource exploitation, such as mining and manufacturing, activities in the urban centers have combined with rapidly increasing populations to exert unprecedented pressure on natural resources. Urban residents generally consume more renewable resources than rural people, thereby placing heavy demands on the environment (Chenje, Paleczny & Soloa, 1998). The proportion of people living in urban areas rose from just under 31% of the population in 1992 (Frost, 2001) to 35% in 2006 (Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe, 2006). In recent years, Zimbabwe's urban population annual growth rate has averaged 5.9% (Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe, 2006). The burgeoning urban population generates large volumes of chemical and biological waste, resulting in pollution and health problems, especially reduced sanitation, as urban planners and managers battle to meet the upsurge in demand for basic services.

With 65% (Central Statistics Office, 2000) of Zimbabwe's population of 11.63 million living within communal areas in the rural districts, the inequitable distribution of land inherited at the country's independence from colonial rule in 1980 has led to problems such as high population densities, high rates of soil erosion, deforestation, land fragmentation into uneconomic units, low productivity, overstocking, and resultant overgrazing (Chenje, *et al.*, 1998). Environmental degradation in the rural areas is, largely, a result of high population densities, land shortage, poor management practices and poverty, as well as climate change with its attendant extremes of droughts and floods. These factors have combined to cause rapid desertification, loss of bio-diversity, and decreasing productivity (Chenje *et al.*, 1998).

For decades, the landownership system was environmentally unsustainable as it led to disproportionate pressure on natural resources. Some areas were sparsely populated with very little pressure on land and other natural resources, while in some areas population densities were very high and resource exploitation excessive with little or no environmental management.

A fundamental policy response to the land distribution problem has been land reform (Murombedzi, 2005). Land reform has gone through several phases in post-independence Zimbabwe, beginning with the market-based land acquisition resettlement program in the early 1980's, through attempts at compulsory acquisitions of the 1990s, to the much maligned Fast-track Land Reform phase that began in

2000. Paradoxically, while land reform has attempted to address the problems of overcrowding and inequality, it has also precipitated a new and catastrophic ecological challenge in previously under-utilized and protected areas where farmers with limited knowledge of environmental management have been resettled (Manzungu, 2004). Due to poverty, exacerbated by successive droughts, and lack of training in resource management, wildlife poaching, deforestation, and stream bank gold panning, among other environmentally unsustainable practices, have reached alarming levels (Chaumba, Scoones & Wolmer 2003).

### **The press in Zimbabwe**

The genesis of the media and, particularly, that of the press in Zimbabwe has always been inextricably intertwined with the political exigencies of the time. Throughout its colonial past and extending beyond independence in 1980, the country has had a vibrant press mirroring the contending political ideologies in the Zimbabwean society. Although the state controlled press has enjoyed relatively more stability over the years, the privately owned press has always had a major presence notwithstanding difficulties associated with censorship and other extra-regulatory constraints experienced under successive governments. At the time of writing, the mainstream press in Zimbabwe consists of eight weeklies. Five of these, *The Sunday Mail*, *The Sunday News*, *The Manica Post*, *Kwayedza* and *Umthunywa* are published by Zimbabwe Newspapers, a publishing company in which the Government of Zimbabwe has majority shareholding. The remaining three weeklies, *The Standard*, *The Independent* and *The Financial Gazette* are printed by independent publishers. There are only two daily papers, *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*, published by Zimbabwe Newspapers. Two other newspapers, *The Sunday Mirror* and *The Daily Mirror*, both published by the Southern African Printing and Publishing House are registered, but have suspended operations due to operational difficulties.

### **Why study the Sunday press?**

The Sunday press allows for in-depth coverage of issues, as there is greater space for investigative journalism, which is critical for comprehensive environmental news coverage, and more time during which the reporter can gather information for the story. There is also a greater likelihood that journalists at a weekly can go out of their immediate surroundings to cover stories as they are not constrained by the 24-Hour cycle in operation at daily papers. Although *The Sunday Mail* is a broadsheet and *The Standard* is a tabloid, both newspapers carry news from all provinces of the country and provide space

for coverage of environment news in different sections of their publications. Both papers offer space in which environmental issues can be covered in various formats. *The Sunday Mail* and *The Standard* have consistently maintained their position as the two leading national weeklies in terms of readership, commanding 42 and 17 percent of the urban readership, respectively, according to figures from the 2005 Zimbabwe All Media Products Survey. *The Standard* is a privately owned paper, while *The Sunday Mail* belongs to the Zimbabwe Newspapers Group in which the Government of Zimbabwe is a majority shareholder. The choice of these two papers was also motivated by the fact that such differences in ownership influence editorial content, thereby allowing for far reaching comparison.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study primarily employed quantitative content analysis with qualitative methods of discourse analysis and key informant interviews to analyze environment news coverage in alternate issues of *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* newspapers, beginning Sunday, May 1, 2005 to Sunday, April 30, 2006, representing one calendar year of publication. Quantitative content analysis was carried out to enable the researcher to determine the manifest features and frequency of local environmental news coverage. Similar determinations were made for news articles falling into the *crime* and the *politics* news categories for comparison. Stand-alone pictures and illustrations were also included as single units in counting of news articles. Discourse analysis was used to get an understanding of, among other things, themes of, and latent devices used to frame environment news coverage at the two publications. Results of these two procedures were used, in conjunction with findings from key informant interviews, to make inferences into organizational and extra-organizational forces determining the level and nature of environmental news coverage at the two papers.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING IN THE ZIMBABWEAN PRESS**

### **The apparent features**

Newspapers are commercial products and the stories they carry are intended to sell the paper. Among the news items published, certain stories are considered most likely to maximize sales and these are often placed on the front page of the paper. Environmental issues seldom make it to the front page of both *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail*. Comparative quantitative analysis shows that political stories are eight times more likely to appear on the front page of *The Standard* than are environmental stories (See Fig. 1). Crime stories are two and a half times more likely to make the front page. Similarly, at *The*

*Sunday Mail* political issues are more than three times, and crime twice more likely to make the front page than environmental issues (See Fig. 2).

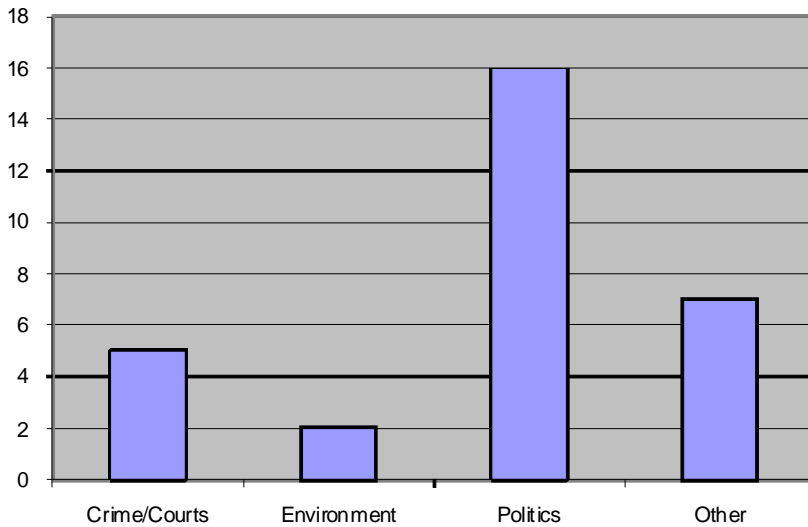


Fig. 1 Number of front-page stories in The Standard sample

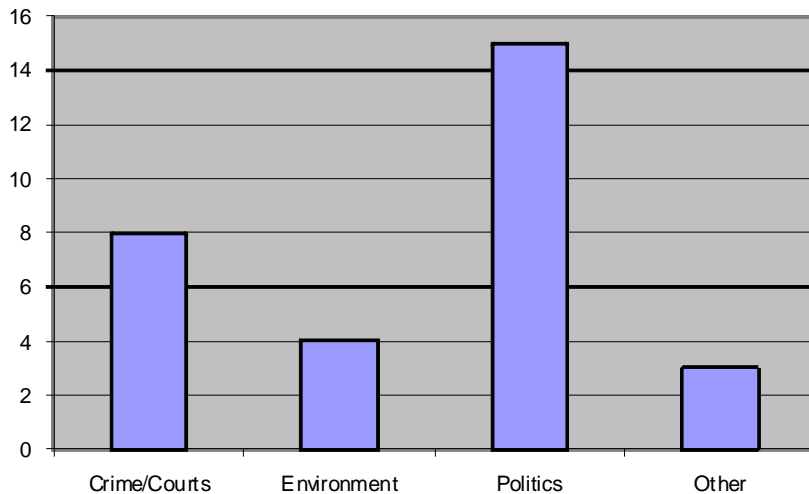


Fig. 2 Number of front-page stories in The Sunday Mail sample

For stories on the inside pages, a hierarchy exist and various techniques are used to guide the reader towards the lead story on the page. These include the use of bold typeface, large font size, use of visual images, and whether the story appears at the top, middle, or bottom of the page. Using a scheme drawn from these techniques to identify the lead story for each inside page, it emerges that political stories still

eclipse environmental stories in assuming lead story status inside the newspaper. However, environmental stories at both papers assume higher prominence inside the paper than crime stories, which tend to be shorter, albeit in larger numbers (See Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

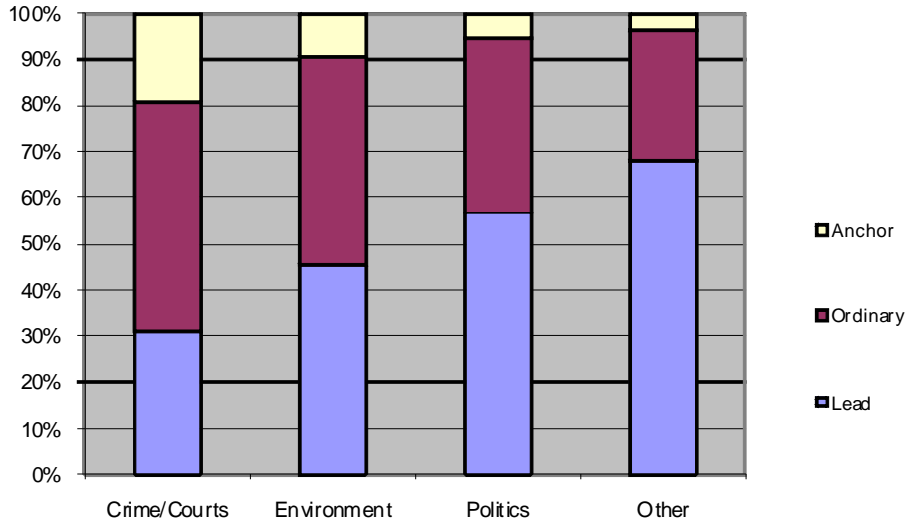


Fig. 3 Placement of inside page stories in The Standard

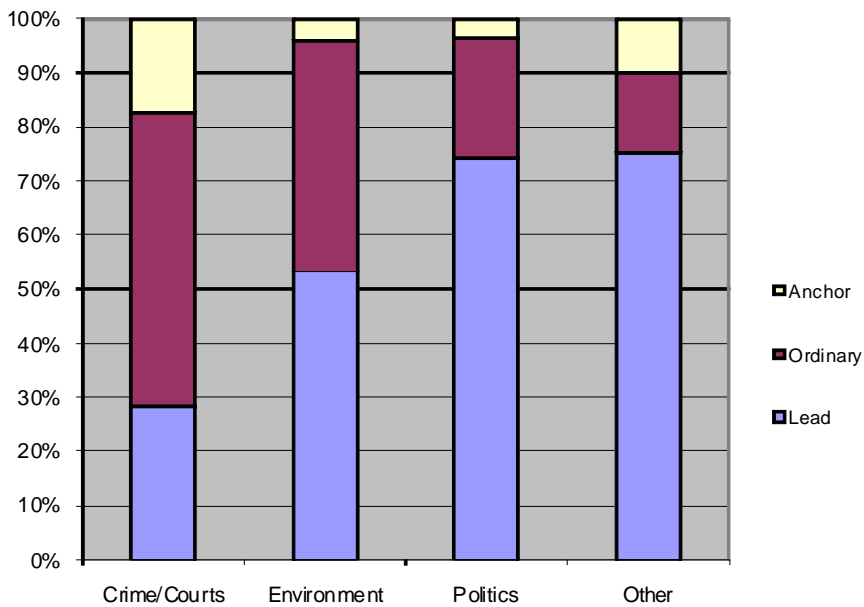


Fig. 4 Placement of inside page stories in The Sunday Mail

Pictures are a potent way to enhance visibility of a story and capture the attention of the reader. At the same time, however, their use is not always determined by perceived importance of the story itself but,



sometimes, by what the picture brings to the story. Analysis of the differential use of pictures for different newsbeats shows that environmental coverage is characterized by a significant use of photographs (See Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). Environmental issues have a strong visual appeal and coverage exhibits a propensity to contain highly illustrative visual images. Further, there is a tendency towards the use of stand-alone pictures, without commentary, to portray various environmental concerns, perhaps lending credence to the journalism maxim: *'a picture is worth more than a thousand words'*.

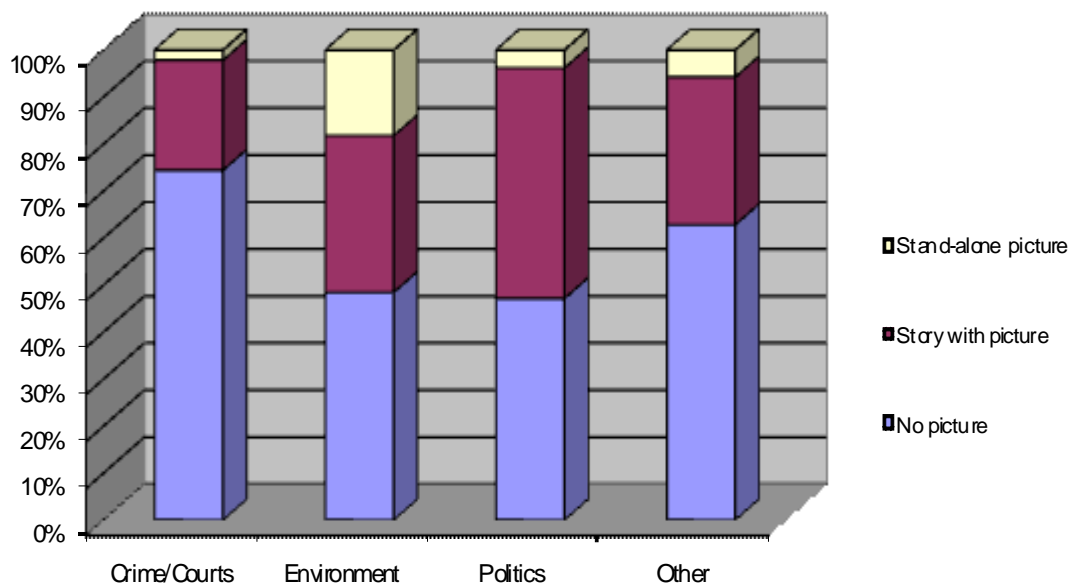


Fig. 5 Use of pictures in The Standard

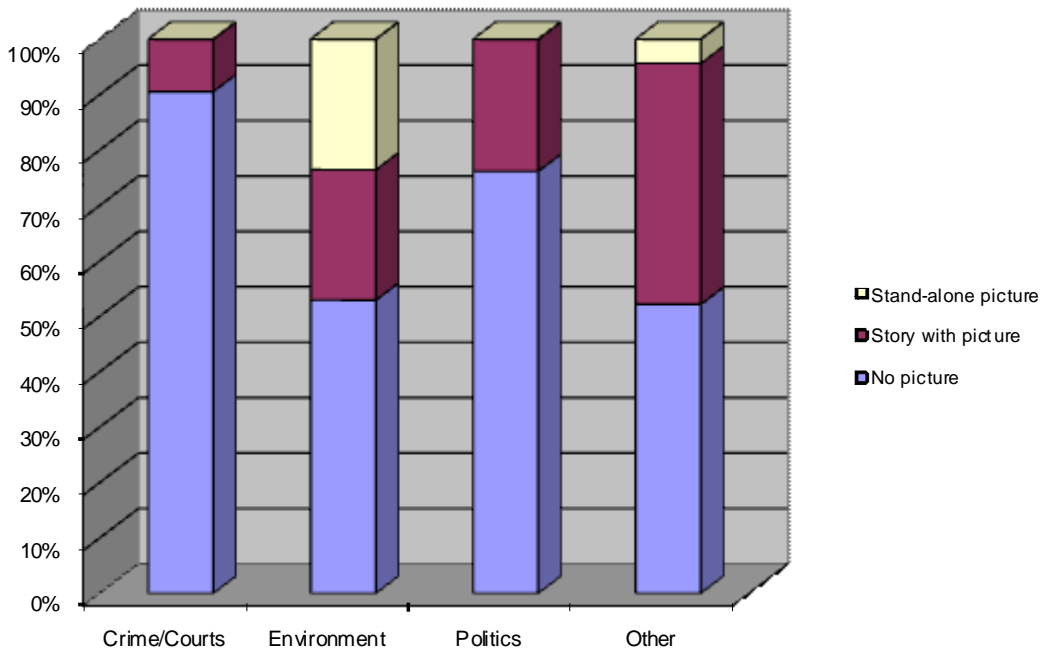


Fig. 6 Use of pictures in The Sunday Mail

Among environment stories, the popular format is the short hard news story, which emphasizes reports of recent events. Hard news accounts for 67 percent of environment stories in *The Standard* and 62 percent in *The Sunday Mail*. By their very nature environmental issues evolve slowly and are rarely well served by the hard news format. Environmental issues arise out of complex interplay between individual and institutional practice and the interface between these and their surroundings. As such, they require multidimensional analysis that cannot be accommodated in a typical 600-word hard news story. Seldom are environmental issues covered in the more appropriate feature or analysis story format. Consistent with local findings, research from elsewhere shows that much of environment news coverage in the press is event-centered hard news (Anderson, 1997).

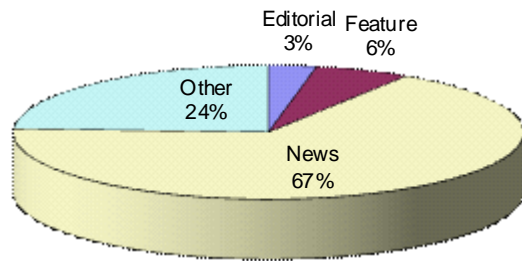


Fig. 7 Type of environmental stories in The Standard

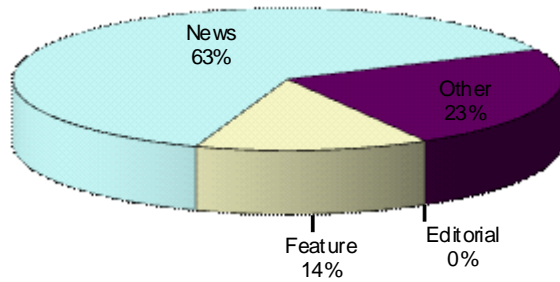
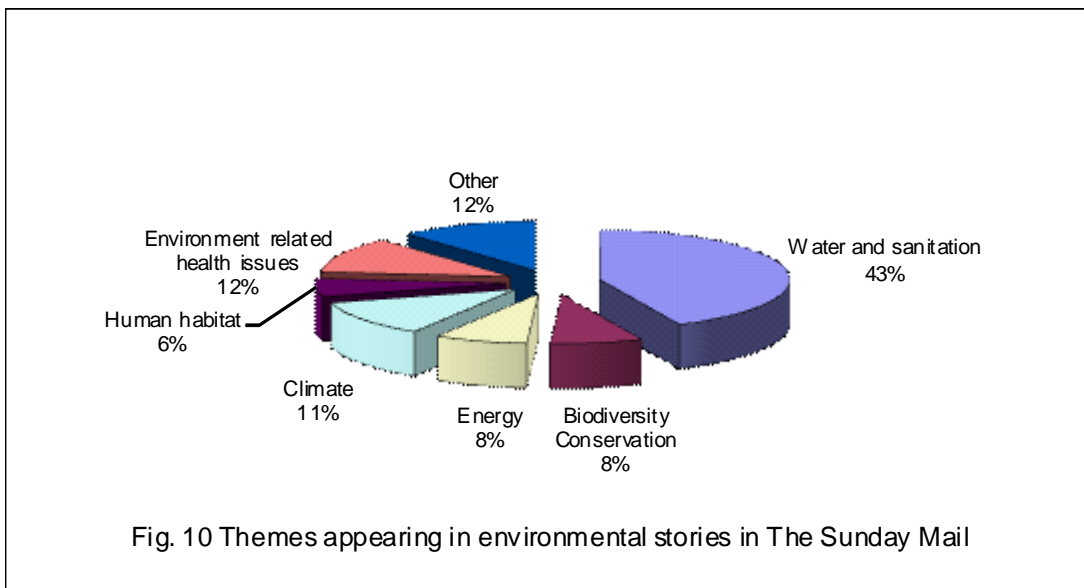
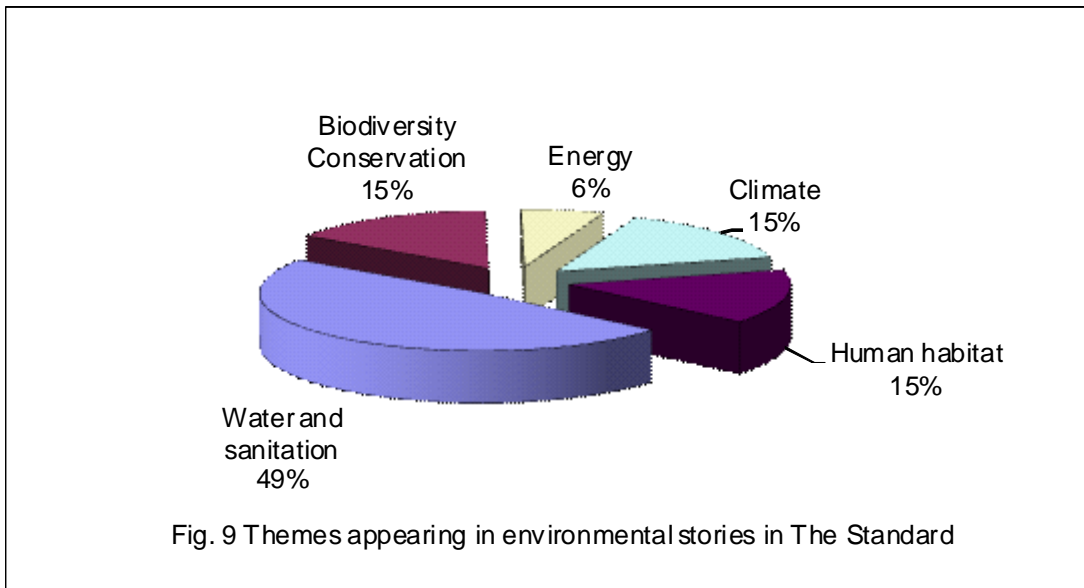


Fig. 8 Type of environmental stories in The Sunday Mail

Environmental news stories are seen to belong to one of a number of themes. Themes are broad classificatory areas used by reporters to tell a story about environmental phenomena in ways that the audience will easily understand. The ‘safe water and sanitation’ thematic category dominates environmental coverage, accounting for 49 percent of environment news in *The Standard* and 42 percent in *The Sunday Mail*. Perhaps it is not surprising, given the persistent and worsening water supply and sewage problems in the country’s urban centers. Water and sanitation delivery is in a shambles in Zimbabwe with the result that in 2008 and early 2009 a cholera outbreak killed more than 4000 people –

one of the largest outbreaks in recorded history. Safe water coverage in the urban areas is glaringly inadequate. Water coverage in the rural areas was 75% in 1999 but by 2007 a third of rural population was estimated to be without access to improved drinking water. A 2006 survey revealed that only 30% of rural households used safe sanitary facilities compared to 60% in 1999.

Other themes commanding appreciable coverage include climate, biodiversity conservation, human habitats, energy, and environment related health concerns.



### **The latent features**

Before news stories make it into the paper, the issue must first make it onto the media agenda. The media agenda is the hierarchy of importance ascribed to different issues by a news organization. The agenda at a news organization is limited in capacity and there is fierce competition among stories for space. According to Dearing and Rogers (1996), we can think of issues as rising or falling on the agenda or competing with one another for attention. This process is essentially a zero-sum-game. What determines whether environmental issues make it onto the media agenda in the local press is a complex interplay between various factors. These include the influence of issue proponents, proprietary power, and the editorial policy with its influence on the value judgments of gatekeepers, exposure of the issue in other media, spectacular news events, extreme events that may result in disaster, and, sometimes, evidence of environmental processes.

Gatekeepers at *The Standard* and *The Sunday Mail* maintain, paradoxically, that without compromising their editorial independence. They must necessarily pander to the wishes of advertisers and the socio-political worldview of their publishers. Thus, environmental stories are rarely value free. Environment news reporting is not neutral and it is routinely packaged so as to conform to the ideological and philosophical moorings of the proprietors. Consequently, there appears a privileged group of sources, comprising government officials and scientists who become the primary definers of environmental issues in Zimbabwe. Very little is seen of environmentalists, except, occasionally, in the private press, as issue proponents or definers of environment matters.

For reasons ranging from lack of competence of assigned reporters, gatekeepers' discretion, and the commercial imperative of the press, environmental reporting, as a category, competes less favorably with other news specialty areas for space on the media agenda.

A general lack of competence for tackling the multidimensional nature of environmental reports dissuades reporters from pursuing the category and sustaining reportage, even when they sometimes stumble on a good environmental story. Further, reporters are not motivated to take up the environment category citing reluctance by editors to afford environmental news proportional space in the paper. Editors, in turn, cite various pressures influencing news selection processes as determinant factors

leading to the observed low output of environmental news stories. Chief among these is the commercial imperative. Editors argue that locally environment issues are largely regarded as a special interest category rendering them commercially non-viable for the popular press. Consequently, there is reluctance to avail resources to the coverage of environment issues. Newspapers, typically, do not have a trained environment correspondent, let alone an environment desk and when environmental news does appear in the papers, it is fraught with distortions and constraints.

Within observed environmental coverage issues are circumscribed by frames of reference that also define their newsworthiness. Most environment stories fall within the related frames of risk, uncertainty, fear, outrage, and crisis. Environmental coverage is characterized by heightened fear of impending consequences of evolving environmental processes. Coverage is often risk-led and based on anxieties concerning threats to health posed by major incidents or disasters. Within a news story, these frames are operationalized by the use of scare words or phrases, the use of contextual references to past calamities, the choice of pictures, and the reference to disaster management related expert sources, among other textual devices. There is an established hierarchy of themes that recur in environmental reportage, the most prominent being those that lend themselves to the frames of uncertainty, risk, and crisis in governance of environmental resources.

The type of story is also used as a framing device. Reporters avoid writing lengthy, analytical, articles based on complex research and, instead, resort to covering environmental events and breaking news of disasters only in terms of the statistics: loss of lives, lost revenue, or magnitude of rescue operations. In attempting to simplify for the audience, they also ensure that their stories get past the selection processes. This lends the environment beat to the hard news format, a frame that does not fully communicate the multidimensional nature of environmental issues and processes.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the clear urgency for increased reportage and discussion of environment and sustainability issues in the country's media, coverage remains low and subordinate to other societal concerns. Chief among reasons for this neglect, is the commercial imperative of newspaper publishers as editors view environmental issues as a special interest category and, therefore, less commercially viable than other issues. Reporters, therefore, are not motivated to take up the challenge of environmental reporting, citing

the adverse attitude of gatekeepers to environmental issues. The absence of a dedicated environment correspondent in the newsrooms also adds to the neglect of environmental news and the uncritical nature of the little coverage there is. When environmental issues make it into the paper coverage, it is often risk-led and founded on anxiety connected to impending catastrophe. News items are mainly in the hard news format privileging hard statistics and rarely appear as well researched, educative, and informative articles.

## REFERENCES

Anderson, A. (1997). *Media, Culture and the Environment*. Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ.

Boafo, K. S. T (Ed.). (1991). *Module on Specialised Reporting*. African Council for Communication Education: Nairobi.

Chagutah, T. (2006). *Environmental Reporting in the Zimbabwean Press: A Case of The Standard and The Sunday Mail*. Unpublished Master of Arts thesis on file at Department of English, University of Zimbabwe, Harare, 151.

Chenje, M., Paleczny, D. & Soloa, L. (1998). *The State of Zimbabwe's Environment 1998*. Ministry of Mines, Environment and Tourism, Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Central Statistics Office. (2000). *Census 2000: National Report*. CSO, Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe, Harare.

Dearing, J. & Rogers, E. M. (1996). *Agenda-setting*. Sage Publications: London.

Food and Agriculture Organization. (2001). *Regional Implementation Plan for Southern Africa*. United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Rome. Retrieved March 05, 2010, from <http://www.fao.org/DOCREP/005/X9751E/x9751e08.htm>

Frost, G. H. (2001). *Zimbabwe and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change: A Working Paper*. Overseas Development Institute, London. Retrieved February 06, 2010, from <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/details.asp?id=3615&title=zimbabwe-international-institutions-unfccc>

Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe. (2006). *Republic of Zimbabwe: Preparation of the Second National Communication under UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)*. National Communication Support Programme. UNDP. Retrieved February 01, 2010, from <http://ncsp.undp.org/docs/637.doc>

Manzungu, E. (2004). *Environmental Impacts of the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme: A Livelihoods Perspective*. In Harold-Barry, D. (Ed.). (2004). *Zimbabwe: The Past is the Future – Rethinking Land, State and Nation in the Context of Crisis*. Weaver press, Harare, 53-68.

Murombedzi, J. C. (2005). Environment and Sustainable Development in Zimbabwe. IUCN – The World Conservation Union.

Mutere, A. (1991). Health and Environmental Concerns in Africa. In Bofo, K. S. T (Ed.). (1991). Module on Specialised Reporting. African Council for Communication Education, Nairobi, 39-46.

Okigbo, C. (1995). Media and Sustainable Development. African Council for Communication Education, Nairobi.

Sedgo, J. & Somé, S. (2001). Enhancing Public Awareness for Increasing Sustainability of Community in Sub-Saharan Africa. Global Blueprints For Change. First Edition, Prepared in conjunction with the International Workshop on Disaster Reduction convened on August 19-22, 2001, Reston, VA.

Tsiko, S. (2010). Community-based resource management vital. *The Herald*. Retrieved March 04, 2010, from <http://www.fanrpan.org/news/6684/countries/zimbabwe>

Chaumba, J., Scoones, I. & Wolmer, W. (2003). Wildlife Management and Land Reform in Southeastern Zimbabwe: A Compatible Pairing or a Contradiction in Terms?. Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa Research Paper 1, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.