

The Role of Claim-Makers in Media Coverage of Environmental Problems in Pakistan

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Abstract

Media coverage plays an important role in social construction of environmental issues all over the world. The coverage is often triggered by the claim-makers who play an active role in highlighting the environmental issues in media. In this context, this study is aimed at analyzing the role of claim-makers in media coverage of the environmental problems in Pakistan. The region of Indus Delta is selected as a case study for this research because this deltaic area is considered as one of the most highly productive eco-region of the country that is facing several environmental threats. The study provides the perspective of journalists covering the Indus Delta about the role of non-governmental organizations, political parties, community groups and concerned governmental bodies and departments in making the environmental problems of the region more news worthy for local and national media. Then the main themes of the data were analyzed and interpreted to answer the research questions of the study.

Keywords: Indus Delta; Claim Makers; Environmental Issues; Ecological Degradation; Media Coverage.

1. Introduction

Pakistan is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world as far as climate change and environmental problems are concerned (Eckstein, 2017). The present government of Pakistan is

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taking several steps to reduce the impacts of climate change and solve the environmental problems of the country. In this context, Prime minister Imran Khan has launched the clean and Green Pakistan movement on October 8, 2018 to address the environmental and climate change-related issues of the country (Ministry of Climate Change Government of Pakistan, n.d).

However, besides the governmental efforts, there are different stakeholders who contribute in some or other way in defining the environmental problems. The cultural, economic, historical factors along with the competing interests of different claim-makers contribute in social construction of environmental problems (Jakku & Rickson, 2009). Moreover, different social and political forces also facilitate the process of construction of environmental problems into legitimate social problems (McCright & Dunlap, 2012). The political parties, NGOs, community groups and government departments are supposed to play an important part in highlighting and resolving the environmental issues. Therefore, their role in this context is being analyzed all over the world (Gemil & Bamidele-Izu, (n.d); Wingqvist et al., 2012; Bossuyt & Savini, 2017; Keys et al., 2014). Additionally, the media coverage is an important factor in social construction of environmental problems (Kalof, 1997). Hence, this research work is conducted to analyze the role of different claim-makers in triggering news about environmental problems and climate change in Pakistan. The deltaic region of the Indus River in Southern Sindh province of Pakistan is selected as a case study for this research. The region is called Indus Delta and it is considered as one of the most important ecosystems for mangrove-swamps and related habitats on international level. Due to its importance in terms of being a unique natural wetland system of the Arabian Sea bio geographic region, the Indus Delta was declared as Ramsar site in 2002 (Khan 2006). However, this highly important ecosystem is vulnerable to many environmental problems including sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and saline seawater intrusion and increasing cyclonic activity in the Arabian Sea etc. The region is also susceptible to the extreme weather events in upstream areas and in the Arabian Sea in its south due to climate change (Rasul et al 2012).

Hence, due to its ecological importance this region was selected as case study for this research. Further, the study focuses on the role of NGOs, political parties, community groups, and

Governmental departments in creating newsworthy content for media regarding the environmental issues of the Indus Delta.

In this context, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are observed playing an important part in campaigning about environmental issues and negotiations /discussions leading to policy-making and agreements for the resolution of environmental problems at national and international level (Giorgetti, 1998). Similarly, different national and international NGOs are working for environmental awareness and sustainable development in Pakistan including the coastal regions of Sindh province of Pakistan (Aftab, 1994). The role of NGOs is also growing in Pakistan and they are working in different sectors including environmental issues (Rehman, 2005).

Additionally, different NGOs are also working in the Delta region for last couple of decades. They have initiated different awareness and rehabilitation projects funded by national and international donors. Therefore, one of the objectives of this study is aimed at analyzing the role of NGOs in triggering news and securing media coverage about environmental problems of the Indus Delta.

In addition to that, national and local political parties are supposed to play an effective role in highlighting and resolving the environmental problems (Lockwood, 2013). The clean and green Pakistan movement launched by Prime Minister of Pakistan also recognizes the role of political parties in resolution of the environmental problems of Pakistan. Development of a political consensus and ownership of the movement by political parties is part of the policy initiative of the government (Ministry of Climate Change, n.d.). In this situation, the role of political parties becomes significant; as they are supposed to represent the people of the region who vote for them because environmental issues are being discussed in context with voter's behavior all over the world (Dalton, 2012). The political parties may trigger environment-related news through assembly motions, and releasing political statements etc. Therefore, their role in highlighting the plight of the people of the deltaic region is also assessed herewith.

The role of communities in protection of wetlands and mangrove ecosystems is being emphasized and their participation in conservation of such forests is considered important. The

Ministry of Climate change government of Pakistan also emphasizes upon the community participation to tackle the environment and climate change-related issues (Ministry of Climate Change, n.d.).

The role of communities is being discussed and analyzed in context with different deltaic ecosystems of the world (Sathirathai, 1998). In the context of the Indus Delta, the environmental degradation is destroying the traditional sources of livelihood of fisher folk and other communities. Especially, the decrease in fish catch is causing poverty-resource degradation nexus. This situation is resulting in a gradual migration of communities from the area (Khan & Khan 2011; Amanullah et al., 2014). Moreover, the role of local community groups is vital in showing resilience to climate change. Therefore, one of the objectives of this study is related with the role of local communities in triggering the Indus Delta related news as these groups can effectively depict the ground realities and their role matters for their own survival.

Likewise, the role of governmental authorities, departments and ministries is highly important to address the environmental challenges and improving the environmental governance (Wingqvist et al., 2012). There are different government departments working for preservation of natural environment in Pakistan that is inclusive of forest department, environmental protection agency etc. The activities of these departments often get media coverage and resultantly environmental issues get on the public agenda. Therefore, they are also supposed as one of the claim-makers whose role is assessed in getting media coverage of the Indus Delta issues.

1.2 Study Objectives

- I.*** To assess the role of NGOs as claim-makers for media coverage of the Indus Delta issues
- II.*** To evaluate the role of political parties as claim-makers for media coverage of the Indus Delta issues
- III.*** To assess the role of community groups as claim-makers for media coverage of the Indus Delta issues
- IV.*** To assess the role of the Government departments as claim-makers for the media coverage of the Indus Delta

1.3 Research questions

- I.** What activities of NGOs trigger news about environmental issues of the Indus Delta?
- II.** What role political parties play in media coverage of the Indus Delta issues?
- III.** At what level the community groups are successful in triggering news about environmental issues of the Indus Delta?
- IV.** Do the Governmental departments play some role in highlighting the environmental issues of the Indus Delta in media?

2. Research Method

2.1 Research Design

The data was collected through in-depth interviews of the journalists who covered Indus Delta news. As this method is being widely used for qualitative research and it is considered as a primary source of not only for acquiring the required data, but also about developing an understanding of the topic (Guest et al., 2013).

The journalists for conducting in-depth interviews were selected on the criterion of covering the environmental problems of the Indus Delta. Those journalists include the field reporters working in district Thatta and district Badin of the deltaic region, staff reporters and environmental beat reporters of Sindhi, Urdu and English media. In this way, total 18 in-depth interviews were conducted from the journalists of various media organizations both print and electronic.

2.2 Sampling

Initially, the journalists were selected on the basis of their published bylined stories about the Indus Delta. Later on, the snowball sampling technique was applied. As snowball sampling is being widely used in area of social research (Dusek et al., 2015). So, by that technique one interviewee provided the reference for other journalist with significant contribution in coverage of the Indus Delta issues.

2.3 Data Collection Instrument

For data gathering a semi-structured questionnaire having 10 questions was prepared to interview the sampled journalists. However, some additional questions were also developed and raised during the conversation with the interviewees to further probe the related facts.

2.4 Data collection method

The researcher visited the sampled journalists at their workplaces and in some cases at their residences to conduct the interviews. The interviews were recorded on MP 3 recorder with the consent of the interviewees. Additionally, while recording the interviews the researcher kept taking important and necessary notes which later on helped in analysis and interpretation of the recorded data.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in a traditional manner that is first the recorded interviews were transcribed and then the transcribed content was cleaned up to organize the data into themes in relation to the research questions of the study. Moreover, the main themes were developed, analyzed and interpreted out of the data to answer the research questions. Lastly, the identity of the interviewees was kept anonymous and their opinions are provided in the results and discussion with pseudo names for ethical and safety reasons.

2.6 Limitation and future research avenues

The data in this study is based on the opinions of the sampled journalists about the role of Non-governmental organizations, local political parties, community groups and governmental departments. Therefore, the findings of this study are limited to the perspective of the journalists who were interviewed for this study. The point of view of the stakeholders including NGOs, political parties, community groups and government departments is not included in this study due to time and resource constraints. This can be considered as a constraint on generalizability of the findings. Therefore, it is suggested that studies may be conducted to know the perspective of the claim-makers about the role of journalists and media in highlighting the environmental issues in Pakistan.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Non-Governmental Organization

Many local and international NGOs are working in the region and many of them were frequently mentioned by the respondents during their interviews. The opinion of the respondents about their role was mixed. The majority of them mentioned their role in organizing training workshops, arranging tours for the reporters and the input of their experts for news stories. In this regard, respondent “K” acknowledged that some International NGOs have the best experts of Pakistan. He mentioned names of few experts from some organizations. However, he also complained about the narrowing role of NGOs in these days like “I don’t see any activity on their part. They are on the back foot. Maybe it is problem of funds. Otherwise, in past they were conducting seminars etc., but now their activities are stopped” – he remarked. Moreover, the respondents acknowledged their (NGOs) role in triggering news, because journalists feel themselves liable to file news story after attending some activity or event of the NGOs.

Respondent “G” pointed out in conversation that the material published by these NGOs is hardly used as a source of information in news stories about the Indus Delta. However, he acknowledged that there is some valuable information available on the websites of some international NGOs. He further claimed that the NGOs are making money in the name of environmental issues. Likewise, respondent “H” believes that the stories provided by the non-governmental organizations are not for the benefit of the general public, but they share photos or information with the media which is related to their projects. However, he acknowledges that “we develop stories from material provided by the NGOs”. Similarly respondent “M” added that:

“The material provided by NGOs is helpful but their awareness campaigns are aimed at highlighting their projects. They are not motivated by larger public interest. Therefore, NGOs campaign for one, two or three months and go away. They do not produce a document or something. They finish their campaign but issues still exist there”.

While commenting on the role of some International NGOs respondent “M” admitted that they did a lot of work in

the coastal belt, but they left the area after finishing their projects and they are no more in the field. “Actually, they failed to involve the community or local stake-holders, so things just disappear when they are gone” – he added.

Whereas, in this regard, the respondent “E” remarked that “They just run away after shutting their offices during the times of cyclone or other disasters. Once the situation normalizes, they reappear with concept papers for getting their projects funded from donor agencies”.

The respondent “E” was also not satisfied with the role of non-governmental organizations. As he claimed that their officials avoid media and often ignore the requests of journalists for interviews.

3.2 Local political parties

Commonly it is observed that the politics related news get maximum space in Pakistani media. Ministry of climate change in Pakistan emphasizes on political ownership of environmental protection and climate change policies in the country (Ministry of Climate Change, Government of Pakistan n.d). During the past few years political parties and legislative bodies have started to take interest in environmental problems of Pakistan. In 2016, a sub-committee of the upper house of the Parliament expressed their concerns about the ecological problems of the Indus Delta (Memon, 2016). Some political parties including current ruling party have included environmental policies in their manifestoes. Environment was one of the major priority areas of the manifesto of the current ruling party for the elections held in 2018 (Bangash, 2018).

Keeping in view the importance of the political ownership of the environmental and climate change resilience policies, the role of political parties and leaders as claim-makers of environmental issues of the Indus delta were discussed during the interviews. In result, some of the respondents were of the opinion that politicians are relatively less interested in environmental issues. “They always follow their political interest. We initiated a mega campaign against the hazardous environmental impacts of a mega drainage project but there was no significant response from the politicians,” the respondent “A” claimed. Further, the respondent “G” is quoted

herewith “Whenever, we need their (politicians’) point of view regarding some environmental issue, first they will ask us to brief them about the facts of the problem because they have less interest in environmental issues”.

However, the respondents mentioned some exceptions. As according to respondent “F” a few politicians do take interest in environmental issues of the Indus Delta. He mentioned the name of a Member National Assembly who took some interest. Later on, two other Members of provincial assembly also highlighted the environmental issues of the region. Whereas, the respondent “I” stated that politicians are largely out of touch with the ground realities and they are not aware of the scale of the damages due to the environmental problems. He emphasized that politicians should play their due role in legislation related to the environmental rights of the local population.

The respondent “L” believed that some politicians are aware of the problem and they understand the gravity of the situation but they have their limitations. The respondent “L” also sees a role of media in sensitizing the politicians about the issue. If a journalist knows a problem very well, he can put a question from politician during a press conference or program and in this way he can force them to speak about the environmental problems. Whereas, the respondent “D” mentioned that some political parties have included the environmental agenda in their manifestoes.

Likewise, respondent “I” opined that local politician do not have much knowledge about environment-related legislation. However, the respondents acknowledged that politicians can play an important role in triggering environment-related news, if they desire so. “Our news media follow the government and politics, so, if they take interest in environment, the media will follow suit” the respondent “P” remarked. He further emphasized that the mainstream political parties should take interest in the problem to make it an issue of national importance. “For example, if national leaders visit the Delta personally to observe the destruction of coastal belt and degradation of the ecosystem and if they announce some environmental impact assessment studies to be conducted by experts, it will definitely trigger news because in Pakistan most of the news originates from political parties” respondent “Q” explained his point of view.

3.3 Community groups

During the discussion about the role of community groups, most of the respondents mentioned the name of a fisherman community group working in the region. “They are focused on fishing. They went through a long struggle against contract system which was against the rights of the fishermen. Now they are working in NGO style. They have lot of information about the total number of fisherman villages. They provide vehicle and guide person for coverage of Delta issues. ” the respondent “G” told. Likewise, the respondent E also appreciates the role of the community group. “They are doing good job whenever there is some issue they reach on the spot. They are doing whatever they can” he added. The respondent B appreciated the understanding of environmental issues in coastal communities. However, very few journalists mentioned the role of local community groups in triggering environmental news related to Indus Delta. The respondent “P” relates the inactivity on the part of community groups to the lack of awareness. “They will raise their voice, if there is some other issue but they are not ready to come out for the environment or drainage issues. Some of them may want to raise their voice but they have not platform”, he added.

3.4 Role of Government Departments

The role of government departments as claim-makers of environmental problems of Indus Delta was discussed during the interviews. Many departments of government are organizing activities that trigger news coverage about environmental issues of the Indus Delta. In this context, forest department launched a plantation drive and broke Guinness book world record of planting the most trees in 24 hours by planting 1,129,294 mangroves on an island near Keti Bunder in Thatta district of Sindh (The Express Tribune, 2018). However, commenting on the topic the respondent “P” claimed that “the government departments land environmental protection agencies do not highlight the issue but they cooperate with us in providing their point of view on our request for a particular story”. Sharing his experience the respondent “R” stated that “the governmental departments avoid talking about these issues. They don’t treat us well”. Likewise, the respondent “G” told that governmental

information department has not been able to play an effective role to highlight the environmental problems of the Indus Delta. He further stated that usually district administration take less interest in highlighting the Delta issues. In my 25 year career of journalism I remember only one district administrator who used to cooperate with us for coverage of the Delta issues. He used to provide vehicle etc. for the coverage.

According to respondent “R” government departments often avoid to provide required information for environmental stories. The respondent “H” claimed that environmental officers are not posted in coastal area. They live in other cities. They visit this region occasionally. “We have their numbers and we contact them whenever there is some issue. Sometimes they do cooperate otherwise they will try to hide the facts. In case they are not ready to provide their point of view we just send the storytelling them that you should be responsible for this” he concluded. Likewise, respondent “E” claimed that he has never seen any noticeable activity of environmental protection agency in his area. “They have never briefed us about anything. They have never invited for any awareness event. We have lost thousands of acres of land to sea. We get this information from other organizations. The officials of forest department also try to avoid us as much as possible” the respondent “E” claimed. The respondent “I” also expressed similar views. “They always try to hide the actual facts; we get these facts very late. When there are some internal differences between the officials they disclose these facts, otherwise they try to hide things” he claimed. Likewise respondent “A” stated that they are following an outdated pattern and not ready to work on emerging environmental problems in the coastal region. Environment is an urban issue for them and countryside has nothing to do with environment.

3.5 Conclusion and discussion

The results of the study reveal that there are many flaws in communication strategy and overall role of the claim-makers to highlight the environmental problems of the Indus Delta region of Pakistan. The non-governmental organizations are working on different projects in the region to create awareness about the environmental degradation and their campaigns have played a role in overall social construction of the Indus Delta issues as their

contribution was repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees. The reporters mentioned that local and international NGOs organize training workshops and support the reporting trips of the journalists to cover the environmental problems of the region.

The experts and officials working for these NGOs provide opinion and other raw material for the environmental stories about the Indus Delta. Their activities often trigger news but their work is project-based and the coverage dies down once the projects are finished. Moreover, there are ups and downs in coverage as NGOs activities are visible for a limited duration of time and disappear from the scene as soon as their particular project is over. The results show that most of the political leaders and parties show less interest in environmental issues. Some political parties mention environmental issues in their election manifestoes and current government has recently launched a nationwide Clean Green Pakistan movement for protection of environment that involves a 10 Billion Tree plantation drive, Solid and Liquid Waste Management, Total Hygiene and Clean Drinking Water. Furthermore, Pakistan was also ice Chair of UN Environment's Forum of Ministers & Environment Authorities of Asia Pacific. Therefore, these activities played a role in triggering environmental news in national press (I.U.C.N 2019).

Though, politics get maximum space in media but according to the respondents local political leaders seldom raise voice about environmental issues. However, there are some exceptions as respondents mentioned few local politicians who are vocal about the environmental issues of the Indus Delta. However, the role of politician in social construction of the delta issues is highly important as they can trigger maximum media coverage. Recently some politicians have raised the Indus Delta issues in upper house of the Parliament and the Senate Standing Committee on Planning and Development and reforms have expressed serious concerns about the sea intrusion in the region (Daily Business Recorder 2017). The results recommend that interest and action on the part of mainstream political parties can play a vital role in social construction of the Delta issues at national level.

The results of the study show that the local community groups are playing a highly positive role in highlighting the problems of the region. These local community groups have better

understanding of the issues and they often provide support and valuable information for news stories about the deltaic issues the local community groups become active whenever some pressing issue arise related to their own community but they are unable to continue the awareness activities or other newsworthy activities about general environmental issues of the Delta to maintain the regular media coverage. More awareness about environmental and climate-related issues will be helpful for more effective role of community groups in social construction of the environmental issues of the Indus Delta.

The results of the study show many flaws in overall role of the Government department. According to the respondents they often avoid providing their point of view about the Indus Delta issues. From the perspective of the journalists overall attitude of the government department officials was not found media-friendly. The district administration needs to take more interest in highlighting the issues related to environmental governance in the coastal districts. The Government department can play more effective role by establishing their offices in the region and adopting more media-friendly communication strategy to protect the deltaic region.

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