

# GETTING AND TELLING THE OTHER STORY

INDEPENDENT INFORMATION AS AN AGENT OF CHANGE

by Paula Fray



UN Photo/Stuart Price



UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe

In the Iridimi refugee camp in eastern Chad, Fatne Abdaraman hauls a 20-litre plastic jug to collect her daily ration of water – one of central Africa’s scarcest resources and a focus of the conflict in the region.

In the Agboglobshie market in the heart of Accra, Ghana, Annie Mbawinyi is one of the many young women working as a market porter to support her family despite extreme social conditions.

In Angola, Vivia Paulino plays with her twin sister in the sand unaware that she was on the brink of death only months earlier because of cholera.

In East Africa, Dr Willis Akhwale, head of Kenya’s National Malaria Control Programme, researches previously unheard of malaria in the

highlands areas which is being driven by climatic change.

These Inter Press Service (IPS) Africa articles represent not only the voices of women and children whose stories are usually marginalised, but also the issues they face – health, development, poverty, exploitation and gender equality – which are largely invisible and overshadowed by a demand for politics, business and celebrity- and event-driven news.

If Africa’s external story is driven by ad hoc coverage of disasters, elections and economic news, its internal stories remain largely national in focus with a few notable exceptions.

IPS aims to fill the information gap appealing to both international and national audiences on the continent. Since its inception in 1964, IPS

has operated on the premise that information is an agent of change. The IPS mission is “giving a voice to the voiceless” by acting as a communication channel that highlights the concerns and interests of the poorest and creates a “climate of understanding, accountability and participation around development”.

As an institution, IPS supports capacity building; and, dissemination and networks between civil society, international institutions, policy-makers, donors and individual readers, to promote an ongoing dialogue about communication and development for a better world.

Our core, however, remains the provision of independent news and editorial content on our global website [www.ipsnews.net](http://www.ipsnews.net). The website recorded over 37 million page views a month last year – reflecting a need and an interest in the “other” story.

But getting – and telling – these stories is challenging.

In today’s globalising world, economies and communities are becoming increasingly interconnected – and seemingly more polarised. Access to the media and media access to stories is constrained by limited financial and human resources. Africa is no exception.

Our first challenge is to overcome a resistance to issue-based coverage and to encourage recognition that development *is* news. The second is to help reporters unpack the story in a way that allows readers to relate to the coverage – sometimes finding a human face is not enough to answer the “so what” question; the story needs to relate to the reader in his or her own environment.

As a news agency that provides news to other media organisations, IPS needs to present the story in a way that is attractive and understandable to users – and so the quest is to find the nexus of news and development.

Who tells our stories? IPS prides itself on using contributors who live in the country or region they cover. Overseen by editor-in-chief Miren Gutiérrez, who is based in Rome, the stories are gathered through decentralised co-ordination. IPS Africa’s regional editor Terna Gyuse co-ordinates content from bureaus in

Cotonou, Benin, and Nairobi, Kenya, as well as from project editors who commission stories from reporters in about 50 countries on the continent.

This too presents a challenge as reporters migrate from freelance to full-time employment; operate in media-repressive regimes or have difficulty in gaining access to the tools needed in our Internet-based operation.

Furthermore, those impacted by the stories issue no press releases on their dilemmas; they are not listed online or easily accessed via telephone or the Internet and too often live at the end of disastrous roads as far from the newsroom as you could want. In terms of time and effort, finding their stories can be tremendously costly... and tremendously rewarding.

Our added challenge is to present Africa beyond event-driven news which is supported by a pyramid structure of news coverage that looks for a “who” (predominantly urban-based males in position of authority); a “when” (today is better than yesterday and therefore event-driven); a “what” (inevitably an event and/or a statement); a “where” (most likely to be urban areas which are more accessible), “how” and “why”.

This structure precludes coverage of process-driven news and seeks to simplify complex issues in a way that removes nuances and complexities.

IPS Africa recognises that sometimes the real stories lie in the complexities; that the food riots on the continent relate to a process that has been building over time and are inter-related to under-reported issues such as the millennium development goals (MDGs); the empowerment of the continent’s women; climate change; aid effectiveness and a host of other issues that underlie governance.

Our editorial products deal with economic,

social, political and cultural aspects of development. A distinctive feature of our editorial production is that we have made an explicit commitment to mainstreaming gender and the MDGs in our copy. This commitment, however, is not enough to ensure coverage. In support of our writers, IPS produces a range of toolkits and checklists to deepen coverage in line with this commitment.

IPS Africa sees itself as first the South speaking to the south and then the South speaking to the North. Our challenge is to reflect aspects of the continent seldom covered – issues of development which are normally marginalised, are our core.

How then do we cover stories in a way that relates complex development issues to people on other ends of the world; how do we encourage people to see their stories as newsworthy?

**Context is key:** the IPS story seeks to provide context that recognises the inter-relatedness of the issues facing the continent.

**Finding a human face:** relating complex events to their ultimate impact on ordinary people allows IPS to “give a voice to the voiceless”.

**Relevance:** whether the story tackles the MDGs, aid effectiveness, integrated water resources management, reseach or women and elections, IPS Africa must seek to ensure that it is relevant to the reader.

**Highlighting marginalised issues:** in an era when the news agenda is often driven by “flavour of the month” issues, IPS Africa keeps a constant watch on development issues such as population development, the death penalty, South-South co-

operation, human rights, governance and poverty as they relate to news events being covered elsewhere.

**Clarity without losing voice:** our challenge is to achieve clarity without losing the writer’s voice so that our ideas, sources and the structure of the storytelling reflect the diversity of stories and storytellers on the continent.

**Going beyond the easily accessible:** maintaining a flow of coverage beyond easily-accessed countries remains a constant challenge on a continent with varying degrees of press freedom, journalistic training and a variety of languages. This necessitates an ongoing drive to refresh our correspondents’ base, seeking funding for unreported issues and seeking out untold stories.

**Localising language:** IPS Africa reports in English and French with translation into Portuguese and Swahili. Within the IPS network, these stories are trans-edited (translated and edited for local context) into more than 20 languages.

IPS believes that strong and independent media, and effective civil society communication, are vital for sustainable and equitable development. This requires the empowerment of both sectors. We believe that all citizens — especially those without access to power and influence — have a right to see their voices and perspectives reflected in news, information and public debate. In short, we cover processes, not events – and we attempt to stay with issues long after the media spotlight has gone elsewhere.

*IPS Africa can be accessed at [www.ipsnews.net](http://www.ipsnews.net)  
Photographs from United Nations Photo  
<http://www.unmultimedia.org/photo>*