



# Ten Practical Tips For Covering Development

by Edem Djokotoe



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By definition, development stories are big news in developing countries. The problem is media reports are typically just government announcements of infrastructure development – roads, bridges, hospitals, etc. – and official claims that lives will improve. Those articles turn off the reading and viewing public, and that has some editors pulling their staffs off this important coverage.

But there can be much more to these stories. Here are 10 tips from [Edem Djokotoe](#), [Knight International Journalism Fellow](#) in Malawi in 2010 and 2011. Djokotoe's advice stresses less jargon and more people, impact and original reporting. It reminds us that we are writing for ordinary people – not development “experts” – to show them the implications of the events unfolding around them. It leads to creative, rich stories full of information and knowledge.



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# 1. Broaden the development story

When journalists assume “development” means government projects, they produce dreary, standard fare, like this in the African media:

*Government through the Local Development Fund (LDF) on Friday launched an urban structure plan for the K400 million Chitekesa Growth Centre in Phalombe.*

But a broader take on the topic can turn up hundreds of stories behind practically every deserted village, dried up river, closed factory, hut and homestead, market stall, farm and even classroom.

One journalist looked beyond government press releases to find a development story in the wine-making business of a biochemist and his wife, in their backyard in the capital city of Lilongwe. Using their salaries as capital, the couple started making wine from local fruits. The article used this startup to cover several larger development challenges at play in the country, such as, the difficulty of scaling up a cottage industry to an enterprise that could create jobs and new exports when taxes are high and a shortage of foreign currency makes it hard to import necessary materials.

# 2. Humanize the development story

For too long, development stories have been lifeless and predictable. You can give these stories impact by putting people in them – because ultimately, development is about changing lives, and that’s what readers and viewers relate to.

One series of newspaper articles used a dramatic childbirth story to cover the collision of health and infrastructure problems in Malawi. The articles explained the government, in an effort to bring down high maternal mortality rates, banned the use of traditional birth attendants and directed pregnant women to go to medical centers to deliver. But that meant long walks for women in remote areas without good roads and bridges – like Lusita Belenado of Gadama, whose nearest center was 20 kilometers away. Belenado didn’t quite reach it. Her daughter was born – with no medical care – on the banks of a river en route.

This human story did have impact. The series prompted Malawi’s president at the time, Bingu wa Mutharika, to lift the ban on traditional birth attendants and to promise to train them, so they can provide maternity services where there are no hospitals or clinics.



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### 3. Focus on ordinary people, not big shots

Ordinary people are almost invisible in the media in developing countries, though their numbers far exceed those who make the news, grab headlines and hog the media spotlight every day. Their voices are seldom heard, their stories seldom told. When they do get reported, they are projected either as victims, beneficiaries of government largesse, a mob given to riotous, antisocial behavior or a cadre of criminals. But as events from North African capitals such as Tunis and Cairo showed, ordinary people can be a powerful force capable of bringing about political and social change.



**Pregnant women await treatment at a busy health center in Malawi.**

It is important for journalists reporting development to focus on ordinary people for three main reasons. Firstly, they bear the brunt of the impact of government decisions and suffer most from deprivation arising from public expenditure priorities. Secondly, they make up the largest sector of the population. Thirdly, in journalism, the sheer weight of numbers counts for something.

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## 4. Look for unusual angles

One way to show how diverse the development story can be is to pursue unusual story angles. A standard development story, based on a Malawi government decision to upgrade a town to a city, makes great claims of progress, like this one does:

*The Malawi government declared the town of Zomba a city on 9 March 2008. As part of the urban development plan for the new city, it wants to rehabilitate the 60-kilometre stretch from Blantyre, the commercial capital of Malawi, to Zomba. Government says the road project will open Zomba up to a whole range of social and economic opportunities, including access to markets and to inputs and make it a strategic corridor for the transportation of goods to neighboring countries.*

But the *Weekend Nation* hatched the idea to explore the cost of progress on Zomba – from the point of view of residents. Suddenly the development didn't seem like such a great deal. The story showed, for example:

- Many residents wanted a say in how their city develops, and they felt slighted by the president and the city assembly making decisions unilaterally.
- Thirty-eight families would lose their homes and 15 traders would lose their shops to the project.
- One hundred twenty-five hectares of agricultural land and 15 of natural trees would also be lost.

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## 5. Report from the field

Much of what passes for journalism today in the African media is actually “churnalism” – simply churning out press releases, wire stories and pre-packaged material as news. It’s cheap and eases deadline pressures. But it’s not possible to report development by remote control, at your desk. You need to get out and go see what’s happening for yourself. You need to meet real people and form impressions. Legwork is a reporter’s reality check.

For instance, only legwork revealed the truth about the extent of drought-induced famine in southern Zambia in 2002. The provincial minister told the nation that the government had distributed relief food throughout the affected areas and that to the best of his knowledge every household had been provided for. But first-hand reporting resulted in a different story: When I traveled there with a team of journalists, we found fresh graves of some villagers who had died from hunger, whole families subsisting on wild roots, and thousands of people who had not received relief supplies for five weeks.



**Edem Djokotoe on a reporting trip in Malawi, where he trained journalists to produce in-depth and investigative pieces.**



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## 6. Use news events to explain issues

Obviously, for journalists the issues worth reporting are those suggested by the news or raised by events in the news. The most practical way to give such issues currency, topicality and newsworthiness is to hook them onto a current event or development in the news, or in the jargon of journalism, a news peg.

News pegs give issues their immediate relevance. Without them, the issues journalists report and write about risk being hypothetical and academic.



**Women sell charcoal by the roadside in Chifunga Neno, Malawi.**

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## 7. Avoid technical jargon

The world of development, like every specialty field, is abuzz with jargon and strange, insider expressions. If you're not careful, your writing will become infected with phrases like: participatory development models, grassroots initiatives, livelihood enhancement programs, income generating activities (IGAs), and even "mainstream stakeholder engagement through shared learning platforms."

The source is a motley crew of "experts" – development workers, development specialists, and international development advisors.

One reason development stories have little appeal is that they tend to be full of technical jargon. A policy of avoiding jargon has another advantage: It forces you to focus on the concrete. At those rare times when you have to use technical phrases, be sure to define them clearly and simply.

## 8. Use statistics carefully

Journalists often use statistics as objective truth, proof of a point or support for a conclusion. The fact is, statistics come from studies, and you have to assess the validity of each one: Who conducted and paid for the study? What did it set out to measure? If it was a poll, who were the respondents? How were they questioned?

Take the case of one general election in Zambia: Two government-owned dailies published polls showing the ruling party head and shoulders above all others. But a privately owned daily had a poll showing the biggest opposition party as the most popular. This raises questions about these pollsters and these newspapers. And it challenges the journalist: Which polls do you publish?

When it comes to development, journalists sometimes rely on statistics from the big international organizations like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund or various UN agencies. One that comes to mind is the number of people in developing countries who live on less than US \$1 a day. But what does this mean? In my travels around the African countryside, I have seen many households where the people make very little money. But the houses they live in are their own. They have cows, goats, and sheep, grain in their barns and their own land, which have value. A good journalist provides context for statistics and explains what they mean in that particular context. A dollar means one thing in an urban setting where one must buy every drop of milk and another in the countryside where the people have cows.

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## 9. Follow up stories

Development is a slow, evolving process that extends far beyond a 24-hour news cycle. Journalists need to track it over time. To keep people abreast of important development – to have impact – you have to stay on top of the story. And the best way to do that is follow up with more stories.

One successful example started with this story:

*On 23 October 2010, then-President Bingu wa Mutharika launched the Nsanje World Inland Port project on the country's largest river, the Shire. The project was intended to give landlocked Malawi direct access to the Indian Ocean thereby reducing the cost of transporting the country's imports and exports through Mozambican ports. It was estimated that the port would reduce Malawi's import bill by US\$175 million when completed.*

Fourteen months later, *The Nation* newspaper followed up with this report:

*Locals, not seeing the immediate use for the facility, are literally dismantling it bolt by bolt, metal by metal, wire by wire and concrete by concrete. "People are melting the bolts and making spoons and pots from them," said one local who fishes in the dock.*

Without this follow-up, Malawians would not have known that Mutharika's dream had turned into a nightmare.

## 10. Read widely

By reading widely, journalists can cover development with a great deal more authority, depth and insight. By staying informed, you discover new facts and ideas, fresh perspectives and conflicting arguments. By casting one's reading net widely, you also broaden your sources.

Even fiction has value, offering depictions of larger, timeless expressions of the human condition. Nonfiction – newspapers, trade journals, and professional and general interest magazines – usually provides more practical information about the current state of affairs.

All kinds of reading should be grist for a journalist's mill.



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## About the Author

*[Edem Djokotoe](#) is a senior journalist and media trainer based in Lusaka, Zambia. In 2010 and 2011, he was a [Knight International Journalism Fellow](#) leading a project to create consistent in-depth coverage of poverty and development issues in Malawi. Originally from Ghana, he has lived and worked in Zambia for more than two decades. He has worked at Zambia's two leading media training institutions, Evelyn Hone College and the Zambia Institute of Mass Communication, and is also a newspaper columnist, writing twice a week for The Post since November 1995.*



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