

“Farmer to Farmer”: Participatory radio for Dekhon farmers in Tadjikistan

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Farmers in Tajikistan have only recently begun to farm with a measure of independence from the state and collective farms of the Soviet era. They face enormous challenges: breakdown of the rural Soviet infrastructure, lack of effective structures to support private farming, lack of finance, endemic corruption, poor rule of law, and during 2000 and 2001 very severe drought. Moreover, there has been almost no discussion in the media of the real problems they face. Farmers do not have reliable sources of information, even on the most basic, uncontroversial, technical aspects of farming.

Farming in Tajikistan

Tajikistan is in a stage of transition from the Soviet economic model, with much of the economy still controlled by the state and most farmland under a high degree of state influence. Between 1995 and 1999, 120 (out of 600) state controlled farms were privatised, mainly into lease farms, joint stock companies and some private peasant ‘dekhon’ farms.

A ‘dekhon farm’ is generally either a small to medium-size family farm (2-50 ha.), or a large ‘collective dekhon farm’ or ‘dekhon association’ (50 to 500 ha.). Dekhon farms are created with a lifelong inheritable dekhon lease. From June 1999 land privatisation was accelerated, with a further 160 collective farms to be converted into private dekhon farms through the issue of land share certificates to collective farm employees. By November 1999 there were 13,000 dekhon farms.

The main priority for the Tajik Ministry of Agriculture is the revenue from the cotton crop, and it is almost entirely taken up with administering the production and delivery of cotton from large state farms through a modified form of central planning. Some of these farms have been nominally privatised, but in reality they are not free to make their own decisions: they must sell to the state at prices determined by the state. Cotton comprises 30% of exports and 30% of total state tax revenues, but the actual returns paid to producers, and the wages of much of the rural population working on the cotton-producing state farms, are close to zero. In lieu of unpaid wages, farms commonly “rent out” land to their workers.

Most of the rural population relies for its basic livelihood on self-production on household plots of land. These provide 45% of the total consumption of rural households. Households implement a complex form of integrated agriculture and land productivity is high. Vegetables are grown for market and for the household’s own consumption, and crop residues from the plots partially sustain small and large livestock.

Mass Media in Tajikistan

Upon independence from the former Soviet Union, Tajikistan descended into a civil war that claimed some 60,000 lives out of a population of 6.7 million. A power-sharing agreement concluded between the warring parties in 1997 established an uneasy peace. The short period of relative openness subsequent to independence from the Soviet Union is popularly believed to have been a major contributing factor in the outbreak of the civil war. The Minister of Agriculture expressed the opinion that giving information to farmers was a very dangerous thing to do, and that freedom of information was one of the causes of the war.

At present, there are no independent national television or radio stations in Tajikistan. There have been several attempts to gain licences for independent broadcasting projects, but no licences have been granted to transmit nationally. Tajik Radio is

essentially an arm of the state, with no public service responsibility. There is no commitment to programmes that honestly reflect the preoccupations or concerns of audiences. The role of programme managers is to control programme content, while programme quality, especially in terms of relevance to audience concerns, is not considered important.

Journalists exercise significant self-censorship, as indeed they did in the Soviet era. Self-censorship is so effective that the people of Tajikistan survive with almost no detailed information beyond what government wants them to know. The impact of this is very deep: this is a society that does not have a dialogue with itself. As in Soviet times, the very act of asking questions becomes uncomfortable, even on the most uncontroversial themes.

“Farmer to farmer” radio series

The radio series *Farmer to Farmer* aims, despite the very considerable constraints, to respond to the concerns and questions of private dekhon farmers through interviews with farmers and a range of agricultural experts. It is broadcast once a week as part of Tajik Radio’s lunchtime programme for rural listeners, and then repeated in the evening. Initially, programmes were 15 minutes in length, but now run for 20-25 minutes.



Radio producer interviewing farmers in the Kulyab province of southern Tadjikistan. Photo: FAO

With support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC), the local office of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) manages the production of the radio series. This is part of a larger project, based in the capital Dushanbe, which trains veterinarians, supports veterinary services, and distributes seeds. The Project Co-ordinator and national staff have close links with the Ministry of Agriculture, which supports the project.

The series is transmitted throughout the country by Tajik Radio. It is a significant departure for Tajik Radio, which has never broadcast an independently produced radio series before.

Implementation strategy

The FAO radio project required attention to four areas in order to be effective: a workable degree of control over production, participatory audience research, journalism training for the radio producers, and, at a later stage, a campaign to promote the series.

It was essential both to recognise the very real limits on the editorial independence of the radio programmes and to attempt to ensure that the project had as much influence as possible over

the production of programmes. The agreement was that the radio producers recruited to the project would plan, record and script materials under the supervision of the FAO Project Coordinator, and then edit and mix the final programme at Tajik Radio. Inevitably, Tajik Radio managers would have an ultimate veto over programme content.

To meet the information needs of the target audience, to ensure the credibility and reputation of the programmes among farmers, and to stimulate and encourage farmers to work together to find solutions to their problems, it was essential to build the project on a solid basis of effective, participatory, audience research. In Tajikistan, however, it was clear from the outset that compromises would have to be made in order to protect both the programme producers and the project. It was decided that radio programmes should initially concentrate on non-controversial technical questions, and that gradually the programme producers would feel their way towards covering more difficult areas.

Focus groups were used to inform and mediate the agenda for the programmes and to fulfil two other invaluable functions. Firstly, they were to provide an objective process for evaluating the success of the programmes - an opportunity to test the extent to which farmers understood, liked and made use of the material. Secondly, the focus groups were intended as a powerful force to re-orientate the radio producers to a new view of their role. Programme producers in the former Soviet Union did not solicit the needs and concerns of their audiences and were not expected to take them into account. Their key function was not to ask questions but to give their audiences an officially sanctioned view.

It was clear that the radio project was a valuable opportunity to support the general development of good journalism practice in Tajikistan, in a relatively uncontroversial subject area. Apart from the two programme producers recruited to the project, training seminars on journalistic research were given to interested parties.

As the audience for Tajik Radio's programme for rural listeners is very small, it was evident that some effort would be needed to promote the radio series once it had achieved an acceptable standard.

Successful initiative

The arrangements for producing and transmitting programmes have been very successful. Programme scripts are finalised with the project coordinator before being edited at Tajik Radio. This has worked well, and there has been a steady improvement in both production values and journalism standards. Tajik Radio representatives welcomed the programmes and have appreciated the variety and new approaches they inject.

There has been valuable synergy in locating the series in an existing agricultural project. The agronomists and veterinarians have provided valuable background information, contacts and stories for the programme producers and have welcomed the radio producers on trips to rural areas. They have been extremely supportive in the research process and sensitive to professional and editorial boundaries.

The lack of journalism training and a decision to concentrate on 'safe' technical themes ensured that the early programmes did not pose a challenge for Tajik Radio. As the series has become established it has gradually become more adventurous thematically, and the questions put to interviewees are more focused.

The participatory audience research has been partially successful. The facilitation in some focus groups has been better than in others. The groups have been well attended, which could be an indication of the motivation of farmers. Participants generally felt that the programmes gave useful information, but that at times they lacked dynamism and did not always provide a rounded view of a subject. The groups stressed the need for

appropriate technical information, i.e. plant and animal diseases, warnings of disease outbreaks, coping in drought conditions, assessing quality of livestock, sources of reliable seed material etc. There were also requests for information on the prices of produce, fuel, fertilisers, pesticides, and ideas for alternatives to increasingly costly pesticides, fertilisers and other inputs.

Broader subjects of concern included rights to land use and legal regulation, relationships with the collective farms, finance and credit etc.

It is clear from the programme scripts that the radio producers have endeavoured to adjust their work to respond to these constructive criticisms. There is no doubt that the radio producers were strongly affected by the experience of observing focus groups, and that they worked hard to meet the needs they heard expressed.

The agenda for the radio series clearly reflects most of the concerns of the focus group participants. Programmes have been made on all the technical subjects requested by the farmers, with close attention paid to ensuring that they are seasonally and regionally appropriate. Increasingly, the programmes are covering the frustration and problems faced by farmers, eg. taxation, corruption, credit, land registration. An excellent "Question and Answer" section in later programmes of the series has given clear and helpful answers to farmers on specific questions. It is very encouraging that the experience and voices of farmers themselves are at the heart of the programmes.

The radio producers have made significant progress in producing well-structured, clear, accessible materials and there has been considerable success in using new production ideas. The producers now have a far better grasp of the strengths and limitations of radio as a medium, and of how to ensure that listeners can take in the information that they seek to communicate.

Staff of the larger FAO project has actively promoted the radio series, distributing 1,500 promotional leaflets in rural areas in many parts of the country. Leaflets promoting the radio series were also sent to the international agencies operating in Tajikistan. However, there have been very few letters and telephone calls from farmers, and it is likely that audiences have remained fairly small in the absence of a structured mass media campaign to advertise the programmes.

The future

Tajik Radio is pleased with the project but like other governmental institutions in the country, they barely survive in economic terms. They have no resources to support the continuation of the project. Sustainability of the project inevitably derives from the availability of donor funding. If economic transition proceeds successfully it may be possible to achieve longer-term sustainability through private-enterprise sponsorship.

Through 'Farmer to Farmer' great strides have been made to improve the responsiveness and relevance of radio to farmers' needs and problems. This is a good beginning, given the constraints of the wider political context. But for farm radio in Tajikistan to be genuinely farmer led, the new programme approach will need to be matched by political change concerning the role of journalists.

Compiled from the report "Az Dekhon ba Dekhon (Farmer to Farmer): A participatory radio series for private farmers in Tadjikistan" by Armorer Wason (International Consultant in mass media, communications and public affairs) in collaboration with the Communication for Development Group, Extension, Education and Communication Service, FAO, Rome Italy. 2002.