



An extension worker (left) and members of the Chimhanda Radio Listeners' Club in Zimbabwe. Network scripts are used in many of their programmes.

Farm Radio Network

Radio plays a tremendously important role in informing African farmers about rural livelihood issues. The worldwide Farm Radio Network distributes scripts on such problems. The author, programme manager for Zimbabwe, writes about his experiences with the programme.

Livai Matarirano

James graduated from an agricultural institute as an extensionist ten years ago. He has been stationed in a remote community in the Mutoko area for the past seven years. Today farmers are gathered under the tree as usual. They are waiting for him to bring the agricultural lesson of the day. James is taking his time coming for he is asking himself which issue he will tackle today. He has so often been talking about the same things in the same way over the last seven years. He feels he has nothing new to add and feels bored with his job. James cannot visit his colleague who is 60 km away and whom he would like to exchange experiences with for he has no means of transport. He cannot refresh his memory or get new ideas about his trade. There is not even a library he can visit.

James is not alone in his frustration. Many rural communicators in developing countries have limited access to information which is appropriate for their clients. But the Farm Radio Network for East and Southern Africa is trying to fill this gap.

What is this Farm Radio Network?

The Network is part of a worldwide network, the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (DCFRN), which is active in numerous developing countries. It is a

network without a radio which may be called more appropriately the Farm Information Network.

The regional network started in July 1992. Participants include broadcasters, agricultural advisors, extension workers, agricultural teachers, village health workers, missionaries and librarians. At the start, only 65 participants were receiving information packages. Today, one and a half year later, about 200 participants in 12 different African countries have signed up for these ready-for-use packages.

How does it work?

Using a simple, broadcast style, we write about simple technologies to improve agricultural production, nutrition and health of rural families. The ideas for the scripts have been tested in developing countries and must require as few external inputs as possible. Participants use material from the scripts as a basis for their radio programmes, teaching lessons, or discussions with farmers. Participants are free to adapt and interpret the information packages for local use. Many scripts are reproduced in local publications.

Participants write back

Participants complete and return a questionnaire, telling us which scripts were most useful, how they used them to reach their target groups and which topics we should write about in future. Participants also send material for use in future scripts.

Recently, we wrote a script under the title "Conserve water: Apply water directly to plant roots, use waste water for irrigation". Alex Kabetezeza, an agricultural field officer in the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development in Bukoba, Tanzania, said: "I was really in need of this information. It worked very well. This time of year, water is scarce. I urge my family not to throw away any used water. Now my family keeps used water in a basin. We use it for watering late in the afternoon." From Jinja, Uganda, Patrick Ntuyo, who is an assistant agricultural officer at the Nile Vocational Institute, said: "My area has two rainy seasons. First there is the major rainy season with heavy rains, then a short season of light rains which starts in September. Now we are in the short rainy season and it hasn't rained yet. I chose a few banana plants and I applied this idea of water conservation. I surrounded each banana stem with four empty oil cans. I made holes in the bottom of each can. I add water to the cans periodically. The idea has worked miracles. These banana plants are greener and healthier."

Workshops

Though participants in the Network are specialists in their respective disciplines, we realise that communication has not been part of the training of many of them. We aim at improving communication skills so that they communicate better with small farmers. In 1993, we organised two workshops on effective writing for radio, print and face-to-face communication for participants in Southern Africa. More workshops are planned in 1994 for participants from East Africa.

We realise that the small farmer is ingenious and there are many working technologies in the villages. Many of these technologies are not documented or publicised. Farmers from other villages could have a use for these tips if only they could get to know about them. The problem is to get this information documented, to present it in a form that is easily understood and to distribute it to the right people. Presenting the information in a practical, plain manner and in short doses of "how to" makes the rural communicators' job more rewarding and effective. Networking is important in order to make the information more widely available. No wonder many of James' colleagues have applied to receive packets of scripts from the Farm Radio Network.

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