

## BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO OLD RADIO: FARM RADIO INTERNATIONAL'S EXPERIENCE WITH PARTICIPATORY RADIO CAMPAIGNS, AND WHAT THAT MEANS FOR EXTENSION SERVICES

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### ABSTRACT

Radio has supported extension activities for decades, but the impact on small-scale farmers' food security leaves much to be desired, for two good reasons. First, public extension has been gutted, and what is left can be unimaginative; second, radio extension programmes are often boring and unfocused. But the story does not have to end there. Some countries realise that public extension must be rethought and rebuilt. And some development players are taking a new look at old 'steam radio' and finding that it has been transformed into a powerful tool to support small-scale farmers' needs for information, for a voice in development, and for mobilisation on issues of importance to them. What has changed on the radio front? Myriad community stations have

popped up across the rural landscape, addressing rural issues. And the exponential growth of rural cell phone ownership has turned radio into a two-way, interactive, participatory medium. This paper presents the results of Farm Radio International's African Farm Radio Research Initiative (AFRRI). It reveals that a specific kind of radio programme series – the Participatory Radio Campaign (PRC) – can motivate up to 40% of listening farmers to take up an improved agricultural practice. PRCs work for women farmers as well as for men, for young farmers as well as for older ones, and for poor farmers as well as for better-off ones. And PRCs involving extension agents lead to higher adoption rates. There are huge gains to be made in smallholder food production – both for food security and for the market – if development

funders get on board, and if extensionists and broadcasters can work together in ways that exploit their complementary strengths.

**KEY WORDS:** *RADIO FOR DEVELOPMENT, EXTENSION, PARTICIPATORY RADIO CAMPAIGN, ICTS FOR DEVELOPMENT, FARM RADIO INTERNATIONAL*

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is about Farm Radio International: its long experience in extension-related activities, its ground-breaking work with Participatory Radio Campaigns and its view of what is important.

I come from a radio background, not an extension background, but I worked at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), which got into the extension business in 1939, when it made its first farm broadcast. And in 1954, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) captured the experience of CBC's National Farm Forums in a book that was read widely across what we used to call both the 'developed' world and the 'developing' world (Sim, 1954).

Fast forward to 1975: Canadian farm broadcaster George Atkins attended an international meeting of farm broadcasters, held in Zambia. One day, while bumping along a rural road to a demonstration farm, George asked the person from Sierra Leone sitting next to him what his next programme would feature. 'Spark plugs', came the reply. George was intrigued. 'How many small-scale farmers hear your programme?' he asked. 'Eight hundred thousand', came back the answer. 'And how many of them have tractors?' The broadcaster held up 10 fingers. 'We know 10 farmers who have tractors. Everyone else uses oxen'. 'Ah', said George, 'so you must do a lot of programming about how to care for oxen!' 'No',

replied the African broadcaster, 'the government wants farmers to modernise, so they give us scripts about tractors'.

George was intrigued by the huge disconnect between the government and the people: between the information the farmers needed and the information their own government was prepared to provide. He thought for a while and said, 'If I could get you scripts on the care and feeding of oxen, would that be of any use to you?' The broadcaster looked him in the eye and said, 'I would love to have that information to share with my farmers!'

To make a long story short, George went back to Canada, wrapped up his career at the CBC, got some funding from the University of Guelph and from a Canadian farm-implement manufacturer, and started researching and writing radio scripts about low-cost and no-cost ways that the poorest small-scale farmers could improve their productivity. In May 1979, the newly minted Developing Countries Farm Radio Network mailed out its first package of scripts to 34 broadcasters in 26 countries in South Asia, Latin America and Africa.

Subsequently, Developing Countries Farm Radio Network changed its name to Farm Radio International (FRI), and narrowed its focus to sub-Saharan Africa. FRI sends out packages of scripts to more than 350 radio stations and production houses in 38 African countries. And everything produced is available to broadcasters, in English and French, throughout the world via the FRI

website (<http://www.farmradio.org>).

Since 2008, FRI has begun diversifying its services to these rural broadcasters. The script service continues, and is much in demand. At first the scripts were written in Canada, now they are written in Africa. And FRI doesn't only send scripts. It also sends how-to tips so that broadcasters can use the research in the scripts to create their own programmes.

FRI found that African broadcasters are just like Canadian ones – they want an infusion of good ideas every week – so FRI created *Farm Radio Weekly*, an information-packed e-newsletter that is sent to almost 2,000 African subscribers every week. FRI was told by broadcasters – public, community, commercial – that there was no training available for agricultural broadcasters, and so it launched an in-house training programme which places African radio trainers for a month in a station helping its staff improve its farmer programming.

To help broadcasters evaluate their work and thereby help improve the quality of African farm broadcasting, FRI established a set of standards (called the VOICE Standards) for farm radio programming.

In autumn 2012, FRI will launch an electronic 'home' for all African farm broadcasters, 'Barza', where farm broadcasters will be able to 'put their feet up', swap stories, gripes and aspirations, share interviews and programmes, and generally 'talk



shop' with colleagues from South Africa to Ethiopia to Senegal.

## CAN RADIO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

In 2007, Roy Steiner of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation contacted FRI. He wanted to know if there was compelling research that showed that radio helps small-scale farmers implement improved farming practices. We could not find compelling empirical evidence, so we offered to design and implement a specific kind of action-research project to test radio's abilities in this area – this became the African Farm Radio Research Initiative (AFRRI).

We knew that a special kind of radio programme series was needed – one for which impact on farmers' practice could be measured. We searched through the literature on the myriad kinds of radio programming being broadcast in development contexts. We then assembled a new form, based on the 'campaign' methodology used so effectively by health agencies, private businesses and churches to promote safe sexual practices or infant formula use, or for proselytising.

We changed the 'campaign' methodology in three fundamental ways:

- We asked farmers to participate in determining what the 'improved farming practice' should be;
- We featured the voices of farmers throughout the programming;
- Instead of urging all farmers to take up the

improved practice, we encouraged them to *make an informed decision* about whether or not this improved practice was good for them, at that time – and to take it up if conditions were right for them.

A year later we rolled out the first Participatory Radio Campaigns (PRCs).

- We selected five countries with different agro-ecosystems: Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Tanzania and Uganda;
- Then we selected five radio stations in each country, including State radio, commercial radio and community radio – and a religious radio station;
- Then we asked each radio station to select three communities that could hear their programming, and a fourth community, similar to the others, but outside the listening range of the station;
- Then we did formative (baseline) research with 40 farmers in each of these 100 communities – enquiring about their current farming practices and their media preferences. We did this across 100 communities in five countries and that gave us a database of about 4,000 farmer interviews;
- Then each radio station produced a weekly, 6-month-long PRC focused on an agricultural improvement that local farmers agreed could improve food security if it was taken up widely. The agricultural improvements were relatively simple ones, such as improved composting, or inter-planting beans with maize. The campaigns

had four distinct on-air stages: introduction, discussion, decision and implementation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A year later, our researchers returned to survey the farmers, and what we learned surprised and delighted us. The detailed results are published in FRI (2010), but the most important findings are outlined below.

In communities where broadcasters had interacted with the farmers ('active listening communities') through visits and phone calls and mentions on-air, we found that on average, 80% of local farmers listened to at least half of the PRC programming and about *40% of farmers who listened adopted the improved agricultural practice.*

These were very impressive results. But we also wanted to know if adoption levels were elevated because of the high level of interaction with the farmers during the campaign. So we looked at the results for farmers in communities that received the same programming, but had had no interaction with the broadcasters ('passive listening communities'). Here we got perhaps the most significant results for the PRC method. In these communities, about 65% of farmers listened to at least half of the PRC programmes, and *over 20% adopted the improved agricultural practice.*

Why are the results from the passive listening communities so important? Because a radio signal, by its very nature, reaches far more passive



communities than active ones. That means that *PRCs engage farmers throughout the whole listening area covered by the radio*, and not just in communities where the broadcasters interacted with them. This shows that the PRC is a very cost-effective form of farmer education and mobilisation.

Now that we know that involving a community raises adoption levels, we plan to fine-tune the PRC method. In future PRCs, we will name on-air all the communities in the listening area, and call out to farmers throughout the whole listening area. We are convinced that this will boost the overall adoption rate from the 20% uptake average in the passive listening communities, to a figure closer to the 40% average found in active listening communities.

PRCs work for women farmers. In active listening communities, rates of adoption were about the same for women and men – about 40%. In passive listening communities, 18% of women farmers took up the improved practice, compared to 22% of the men. This is not bad, given that men usually control a family's single radio receiver (in the same way that men in Canada tend to control the TV remote!). PRCs work especially well in places where the improvement relates to women's farm work. In fact, in Mali, women were dissatisfied when a PRC on composting was designed. Men did the composting, and the women felt left out. They demanded that their radio station create a PRC on a subject important to them. And so the station did a PRC on improved production of Shea butter!

What about young farmers? In active listening communities, a greater number of younger farmers adopted the new practice than older farmers. It was the reverse in passive listening communities and that has us baffled!

We wondered if PRCs might only work for better-off farmers. When we surveyed the farmers before and after the PRC intervention, we did not think to include questions about their relative level of prosperity. However, we asked them if they owned a cell phone, and while this is not a perfect proxy for relative wealth, it is something. So, we used these data: in passive listening communities, for example, about 25% of male cell phone-owning farmers took up the improved practice, and almost 20% of non-cell phone-owning male farmers took it up. We need to do more research, but this gives us an indication that PRCs reach and benefit the most needy, lower-income farmers.

We also looked at the various kinds of radio stations that ran PRCs – State radio, community radio, religious radio, commercial radio – and found that there were successful PRCs conducted by all kinds of stations. Community-based stations tended to have the most success, perhaps because their very purpose is most closely allied with the purpose of the PRC. However, State-run radio stations usually have a far wider listening area, and a PRC can capture large numbers of farmers, even if the proportional uptake is lower than for PRCs run by community stations. The

most important indicator for PRC success seemed to be not the kind of station, but whether farmers trusted the station – whether they thought the station served their interests, week in, week out.

Finally, we found anecdotal evidence that stations that involved local extension agents had consistently higher adoption rates. This did not surprise us. Radio and extension bring different, but equally essential resources to a PRC. For example:

- Radio can be everywhere every day, in everyone's ear – extension can be in some places, at some times, but in the flesh;
- Radio can stimulate listeners to build active mind-pictures – extension can show farmers real evidence in the field;
- Radio understands communication – extension understands agriculture.

### **Why does radio work? Next steps and lessons learned**

We think there are a number of reasons why the PRC approach to radio and extension has such impressive results:

- It uses radio, which is farmers' most widely used, and preferred, communications medium;
- It uses cell phones for interactivity with those farmers, both on-air and off-air;
- It features a time-bound radio series with a dramatic progression;
- It focuses on a single, simple agricultural



improvement recommended by farmers;

- It encourages farmers to consider taking up the improved practice – it takes farmers seriously as decision-makers in development;
- It features the voices of farmers throughout – questioning, laughing, describing, arguing, working, deciding, advising;
- It provides wall-to-wall, how-to-do-it support for those farmers who take up the new practice;
- It celebrates the achievements of the farmers.

And along the way, it uses the full range of ‘tricks’ that radio is so good at: building suspense, drawing out shy people’s voices through interviews, telling stories, encouraging widespread discussion through phone-ins, tracking down elusive officials through phone-outs, breaking up serious talk with music, using on-air quizzes to drive home key messages. The PRCs were never boring. They were stimulating, engaging, ‘not to be missed’ radio programmes.

FRI started working with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) in 2011 to plan and produce PRCs in Mali on drought-resistant crops such as sorghum and millet. This will be extended to Tanzania in 2012 to include PRCs on intercropping maize and beans. We will also be returning to earlier PRC communities to survey farmers and find out whether they have continued with the new practices they adopted 2 and 3 years ago. FRI is also seeking modest funding to encourage stations

that have PRC experience to continue doing PRCs. Obviously, FRI is interested in partnering with other international donors and public extension services to use PRC methodology to scale-up the adoption of best farming practices on a wide-scale, at reasonable cost.

We are very excited about the renewed interest in extension services, and equally concerned that renewed extension serve the real needs of rural Africans, and not just the needs of governments and foreign countries that want cheap produce. The first task of public extension should be to help rural people produce nutritional food for rural people, where nutritional levels are the worst in spite of access to land. The second task is to help farmers improve the production of food that can be bought and sold locally to put cash into the pockets of rural people so they can pay for food they cannot grow, and also pay for schooling and medical care. We should take the ‘value chain’ approach to agriculture – the new ‘hot topic’ for so many in the development field. While it is often advocated in relation to cash crops for export, it should also be used to add value at each link in the growing of subsistence crops. This kind of value chain work can lead to better nutrition for the poorest rural African people.

We need to stop being afraid of small-scale farmers and bring them fully into the development discussion. We know that the earlier development method of opening heads, pouring in knowledge

and expecting farmers to jump, simply did not work. In fact, extension services have a better record here. Extension has always known that you must go to the farmer and engage her or him at the farm level, face to face, using the farmer’s language. State radio, in several instances, adopted long, complicated academic harangues in English or French to ‘improve’ farmers’ knowledge and this has not been successful.

Increasingly, smallholders will be women and older people, as young adults move to towns and then cities, in what appears to be an unstoppable worldwide trend. Women already carry out 70% of all agricultural work in many countries, but you would not know that when you listen to radio programming or follow extension workers on their motorbikes. How can we break down barriers, and recruit and train women extension workers – and deploy them securely?

PRCs are a very useful, special radio tool, but farmers need a reliable, regular (weekly or daily) radio programme that provides them with the information they need, and provides them with a space where they can speak and be heard. We call this the ‘regular farmer programme’ – in contrast to the highly specialised, time-bound PRC. As regards compensation, why is it that we train and pay people who work in local health clinics, local schools, local extension work, but we expect rural broadcasters and radio stations to work for free? Radio stations can be a fundamental



building block in a renewed public extension service, but not if the stations are losing staff and even turning off their transmitters because of lack of funds. The costs of running a radio station are not imaginary – they are real, and a station director's first task is to find sustainable revenues to keep its programme service on-air.

No one has the time or money to support farm radio programmes or extension services unless they make a measurable difference to the quality of life of rural people. One way of doing this is to set SMART (i.e., Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely) outcomes for both services. We will then need relatively simple ways to measure outcomes and use them!

Bring radio and extension managers together so that they find ways to work together on a continuing basis on substantial shared projects and activities. As noted above, radio and extension have complementary abilities to bring to the service of small-scale farmers. In these days of tight budgets, radio and extension need each other.

## **CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

From where we sit, the greatest innovation need is not in *technology*, but in *will and leadership*.

- We need innovation of will by governments – to design and to fund effective extension services;
- We need innovation of will by international funders – to see the importance of public

extension, and fund it;

- We need an innovation of will by radio stations – to put their shoulder to the wheel and become part of a new age of extension, creating radio programmes that serve farmers well, programmes that provide the information farmers need, when they need it; programmes that give farmers a voice in development;
- We need innovation of will by extension managers and workers – an openness to working in new ways, and with new partners.

And once we have done our innovations, perhaps we will find that we have served small-scale farmers well, supporting them to unleash a wave of small-scale farming innovation that will boost rural nutrition and city food supplies.

We at Farm Radio International cannot wait to get started on the next chapter of our important work together!

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