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# Using Radio for Community Mobilization: Experiences in Zimbabwe and Kenya

by Nancy George \*

## Abstract

The aim of the experiment is to determine whether radio can be used in Kenya in the same way as it is used in Zimbabwe in the Development Through Radio (DTR) project.

In the Zimbabwean project, 10 to 20 women in each Radio Listening Groups (RLG) gather once a week to listen to a DTR broadcast in their local language on development information for farmers; and to discuss the broadcast and raise issues to be addressed in future DTR programmes. The programmes are community-oriented and a limited number is produced by the women's groups. Preliminary results in Zimbabwe show positive affirmation of the RLGs as contributing to developmental needs of a specific community.

The RLG, as it is being structured in Kenya, holds promise of being able to increase women's interest in and use of nutrition-related information in the selection and preparation of food for their families.

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# **Usage de la Radio pour la Mobilisation Communautaire: Expérience au Zimbabwe et au Kenya**

par Nancy George

## **Résumé**

Le but de cette expérience est de déterminer si la radio peut être utilisée au Kenya de la même manière qu'elle est utilisée au Zimbabwe grâce au projet "Développement Par la Radio."

Dans le projet DPR du Zimbabwe, 10 à 20 femmes se mettent ensemble chaque semaine pour se constituer en "Groupes des Auditeurs de la Radio" et écouter une émission du DPR radiodiffusée dans leur langue locale sur l'adoption par l'agriculteur de l'information sur le développement. Elles discutent de ce programme et posent des questions qui seront adressées dans les programmes DPR futurs. Les programmes ont une orientation communautaire et un nombre limité est produit par les groupes des femmes.

Des résultats préliminaires au Zimbabwe montrent une affirmation positive des GAR comme contribuant à la mobilisation d'une communauté spécifique autour de ses besoins particuliers de développement.

# Using Radio for Community Mobilization: Experiences in Zimbabwe and Kenya

... in dealing with communication problems...There are no permanent formulas ...the resonance principle suggests that the starting point for understanding and creating communication lies in examining the communication environment you are living in at this moment...(Schwartz, 1974).

## Introduction

There is a variety of communication strategies, some more valuable than others, which can be employed to transfer information from the "experts" to those who need that information on infant and young children's nutrition. Until quite recently, those involved in development communication tended to be derided as technocrats or, even worse, simply ignored. Those actively involved in development considered the content of their messages more important than the means of delivering them, believing - quite incorrectly - that if one can generate useful subject-related information, those who can benefit from it will use it. That belief could be supportable only if those who can benefit from the information are aware of its existence.

Until recently, development researchers and practitioners have considered the ingredients which constitute communication strategies or processes as addenda to the development content, whether it be related to water and sanitation practices, improved farming practices, primary health care or infant and young child nutrition.

And for those familiar with the cultural milieu of North America or Western Europe, communication of development information appears simple because of the ubiquity and pervasiveness of the preeminent mass media—print, radio and television.

However, the apparently simple becomes considerably more complex when the communication process is approached from the perspective of communication researchers. The perception of the value of the mass media in the development process has changed markedly with

the evolution of radically different development paradigms. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the early media advocates, who optimistically—or arrogantly, according to scholars like Melkote (1991)—believed that development and modernization were synonymous, claimed that the mass media were dominant and powerful influences on their audiences. They could therefore be effectively employed to deliver development information to passive audiences who then would be stimulated to implement positive developmental actions and/or changes in the community behaviour patterned on modern western societies (e.g. Berlo, 1960; Schramm, 1964).

The technocrats' optimism about the power of the media to make development easy was constructed on an assumption related to the mode of delivery: because the media can deliver information, audiences want to receive it. Because the signals of the big, urban-centred media could reach large audiences, they could be used to diffuse innovations and development information easily and effectively to passive (and, it was assumed, receptive) audiences, who, the advocates believed, would readily absorb what the media delivered.

Melkote (1991) sums up the perceptions of the power of the mass media in the world of development in the 1950s and 1960s as follows:

The mass media were thought to have a powerful, uniform and direct influence on individuals... The strength of the mass media lay in their one-way, top-down and simultaneous and wide dissemination. And since the elites in every nation were required to modernise others in the population, the control of the prestigious mass media by them served their economic and political interests... (The mass media) were considered as magic multipliers of the development benefits in the Third World nations. Administrators, researchers and field workers sincerely believed in the great power of the mass media as harbingers of modernizing influences.... (p. 87).

In the past 20 years, however, these theories have changed dramatically. By the 1970s, there were major shifts in the traditional communication, education and development paradigms. In the development field, there was a general denigration of the assumptions underpinning the dominant development paradigm and the advancement of a "self-development" paradigm. Development was no longer assumed to be a "packaged" commodity which could be delivered to passive recipients. As early as 1971, Havelock (1971) broached the concept of a problem-solving model for community development, focusing on a community's diagnosis of its problems and identification of potential solutions to them. Similarly, the "experts" began saying that for communication to be effective, it had to be a two-way, not top-

down, and lateral as well as vertical.

And indeed, these theories of development and communication are congruent with the shifts in educational theory of the 1970s. If one accepts that development is basically and primarily an educational process, and that communication is an integral component of both education and development, the complimentary shift in the paradigms of all three fields was predictable. The communication strategy selected is the significant ingredient in the teaching/learning experience which can either facilitate or obstruct that experience. And just as educators, through the increasing ascendancy of Jean Piaget's (1935) ideas in the 1960s and early 1970s (see, for example, Duckworth, 1964; Bart, 1972; Kamii, 1974) and Paulo Friere's (1970) adult learning philosophy, became increasingly aware of the value of the learners' active involvement in the learning process (no matter what their age), so development agents and communicators have become increasingly aware of the imperative of the community participation in the development process.

The evolution in thinking about the nature of communication within the development process is the necessary underpinning for the discussion contained in this paper.

## **Appropriate Media and Community Development**

Current development philosophy argues that any attempts at development must begin with those who need the "development", rather than with the elites or outsiders who define a community's problems in a contextual vacuum.

Media, with the concept of self-development, need to be both appropriate and relevant. Interestingly, not all of the useful examples of appropriate media deployment in the self-development paradigm originated in the Third World. Indeed, both of the examples cited here have come from Canada, an industrial country where the vastness of the land and its comparatively small population have continually challenged communication strategies for reaching the more isolated communities within its borders.

The Radio Farm Forum model, which was widely proliferated in India and Latin America during the 1970s, was patterned after an extremely popular and long-lived Canadian radio series which began in the early 1950s, entitled Farm Forum. Targeted to isolated Canadian farming communities, the series was broadcast across the country each week on the national Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) network. The Farm Forum format encouraged the members of isolated

## farming

communities, some originally with little access to radio, to gather at one farmer's house each week to listen to the programme, and then, following the broadcast, to discuss the programme content and any other related farming issues with their neighbours. Listeners were encouraged to write in to the programme with questions, problems and ideas stimulated by the broadcast, and these listeners' contributions formed part of subsequent programmes. In many cases, especially in the latter years of the series, the farmers' groups who had contacted the programme producers with ideas or suggestions were called during the broadcast to make their contributions to their peers across the country.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the National Film Board (NFB) of Canada, whose mandate was "...to provoke social change through the use of video and film" (Burnett, 1991), developed a series called Challenge for Change. The most famous of the CFC series was produced in the community of Fogo Island, Newfoundland.

As the producer Collin Low said at the time, he wanted to recount the history of the people living there in their own words. He felt that what they had to say was more important than what he could put together as an outsider... He interviewed them... and he did his best to put the people at ease. He never shot without permission, and he gave the interviewees the chance to view the footage and remove whatever disturbed them... (He uses an) interactive approach (which) created more and more discursive spaces in which the local people could not only examine what the film makers were doing but also question their own orientation and direction. It is generally agreed that Fogo Island changed after the work of Low and his partners (Burnett, 1991).

Initially, the camera crew came to Fogo Island to document the decline of the community in the face of the loss of their fishing industry. However, confronted with a community whose members were reluctant crew, the producer persuaded the residents to use the video camera and recorder to document their lives and problems themselves. Stimulated by viewing the resulting video tape, the community collectively decided on a plan of action to rebuild their village and obtained assistance from the government to do so.

So successful was the outcome of this experience of Fogo Island, that its replication in other communities has become known as "the Fogo process" (Schramm, 1977).

to express themselves on camera before a "professional"

Although small format video, building on the Fogo Island demonstration of its usefulness for communities to document their own problems, has recently become an extremely useful community development tool (Thede and Ambrosi, 1991), nevertheless, video is more expensive and far less pervasive than radio in Eastern and Southern Africa; therefore, this paper will confine itself to discussion of two ongoing social mobilization<sup>1</sup> projects which are attempting to democratize selected programming aired on the nationally broadcast radio networks in Kenya and Zimbabwe to increase the mediums contribution to community development.

Since the advent of the transistor, radio has become a familiar medium in even the most remote African village. And placing the radio cassette recorder within easy reach of rural villagers can produce results not unlike the synergistic experience of the Fogo Islanders.

During the 1970s, under the aegis of international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community development groups, a number of donors (notably, the Canadian International Development Agency and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation) funded experiments in the adaptation of the Radio Farm Forum in a variety of developing countries in Latin America, India and Africa. However, without exception, these experiments died out with the demise of donor funding; by the early 1980s, almost all of them had ceased to function. The question that necessarily arises is, "If they were so successful, why didn't they continue?"

Frequently, those who advised on the replication of the Farm Forum model advocated the establishment of evaluation strategies; however, few of them are actually systematically evaluated (Bryam and Kidd, 1983). One possible reason for the demise of the Radio Farm Forum experiments is the lack of research and evaluation to demonstrate that they actually made a positive difference in the lives of the group members or their communities. Therefore, while available literature on the use of the Farm Forum model (or radio learning groups) explains how to set them up (see, for example, Crowley, Etherington and Kidd, 1978), there are few analyses of the long-term benefits of this model in community development.

Certainly, in Africa, the adoption of radio as the most appropriate medium for the dissemination of development information to communities was predictable in the context of the old development and communication paradigms. It is the most pervasive of the mass media in Africa, the most easily accessible (especially for communities without electrification), the most affordable and, the old paradigm of



"top down" development is no longer useful. Therefore, today, the

challenge is to determine whether the radio medium, with its ready availability and popularity, can be transformed into an appropriate tool for community-initiated development activity and whether it can be democratised and used by African communities to assist them in their self-development.

Over the past three years, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has been supporting investigations of this question in Kenya and Zimbabwe in two separate but interrelated research activities<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Development Through Radio (DTR) Project in Zimbabwe**

Since 1985, the Federation of African Media Women of Zimbabwe (FAMWEZ), with funding from UNESCO and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the partnership of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation's Educational station, ZBC Radio 4, has established a total of 45 radio listening clubs in four provinces of the country. The project, called "Development through Radio", is targeted to women in the rural areas of Zimbabwe, who, in many cases, have been left to manage the household and farm because the men of the family have migrated to urban areas to find work.

The DTR model has evolved from the Radio Farm Forum concept. The Radio Listening Clubs (RLCs), originally formed from local branches of the Zimbabwean Association of Women's Clubs, have membership ranging from 10 to 20 women who gather together once a week to use the radio cassette recorder provided through the project to listen to a DTR radio broadcast in their local vernacular language and to discuss and comment on the broadcast. Additionally—and perhaps, most importantly—the DTR members raise issues from their discussions to be addressed in future DTR programmes. Thus, although the programmes are compiled and produced in an urban setting—the Harare studios of ZBC Radio 4, they avoid the inherent danger of making the women's groups essentially the programmes producers.

The DTR Leader has described the operation of the Radio Listening Clubs as follows:

"The Radio Listening Clubs meet weekly to discuss their most pressing problems and other issues of interest within the community; their deliberations are recorded and the tapes taken to collection points where the Coordinator/Producer...collects them. Back at the station, the Coordinator/Producer listens to the recordings and arranges with appropriate experts, ministries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to record their responses to the problems and issues discussed by the Clubs. Such responses may consist of information the communities need to solve their problems themselves, or of actions to be taken by...experts, Ministries or NGOs in response to the problems or issues. The Coordinator/Producer then packages the RLC inputs and his own recordings to produce a half hour programme which is aired every week in... (Ndebele and Shona). After listening to the programme, the RLC members respond to it and record their discussion for use in follow-up programmes" (Moyo, 1991).

For many of the RLCs the result of the participation in the DTR project has been more than passive acceptance of mediated messages. A typical example of their potential role in village and/or community development has been documented in the Mhondoro District of Zimbabwe (Moyo, 1991). As part of one of their post-programme audio-cassette recordings, the Changachirere RLC in Chivero documented the fact that they were suffering a shortage of clean water because of a lack of wells in the district. The community had complained to its Member of Parliament and District Administrator, but had received no response to their complaints.

The Changachirere RLC organised and audio-taped a discussion of the water problem. With the assistance of the DTR Coordinator/Producer and other members of the community, they collected water samples from the riverbed—the sole source of water for the community—and sent them to Harare for analysis at the government laboratory, where the water was discovered to be contaminated and in urgent need of treatment. The laboratory report was communicated to the community through the weekly RLC broadcast, in a programme which presented the situation (as recorded by the RLC group members) and taped responses obtained by the Coordinator/Producer from the District Council Chairman, The Zimbabwe Red Cross Society (who offered to help the community if they formed a local Red Cross Chapter), The Ministry of Energy and Water Resources, the local Health Inspector and the District Administrator.

Since the initial programmes discussing the problem, the Zimbabwe Red Cross, World Vision International and the Catholic Development Commission have assisted the communities to develop well in the district.

Commission have assisted the communities to develop well in the district.

Although not originally involved in the DTR project, in 1991, the Communications Division of IDRC agreed to support the evaluation of the DTR pilot experiment. Famwez has received many enquiries from other Women's Clubs in Zimbabwe requesting that they be allowed to join the project. However, FAMWEZ felt that any expansion should be preceded by an evaluation of the project as it has operated thus far. In keeping with the participatory nature of the RLCs, FAMWEZ wanted to conduct a participatory evaluation themselves to determine whether the RLC concept should be expanded, and if so, what improvement needed to be made in the project's structure and administration. Preliminary results have identified several operational difficulties with the project, but, nevertheless, they show an enthusiastic affirmation of the concept of the Radio Listening Clubs as contributing positively to mobilization of the community around its particular development needs. FAMWEZ is currently compiling the findings of this evaluation for incorporation into a larger community-based development scheme in Zimbabwe, and possible replication of the DTR model in other countries in Southern Africa<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Establishment of Radio Listening Groups (RLGs) in Kenya**

The Communication Division of IDRC did not become involved with the DTR experiment until the evaluation stage, but it has funded and encouraged the evolution and development of the Kenyan experiment from the outset.

In 1989, Ms. Mary Ngechu, the radio lecturer from the University of Nairobi's College of Education and External Studies (CEES), approached the IDRC with the idea of developing radio programmes which would disseminate the results of agricultural research to smallholder farmers in Kenya, who, for the most part, she believed, were excluded from service within the traditional extension system.

Her initial proposal was built on a number of assumptions: that the old "dominant paradigm" of top down information dissemination would affect the transfer of information in the rural Kenyan context; that radio sets were widely available, in serviceable condition and accessible to her espoused target audience, the smallholder farmer; and that development information delivered by radio would be accepted and acted upon by that audience.

To explore the validity of all these assumptions, and to obtain a clear definition of her proposed target audience—its composition and demographics—IDRC and Ngechu agreed that prior to the funding of a major research experiment in the usefulness of radio in delivering development information, she should undertake a feasibility study.

The results of this feasibility study were illuminating (Ngechu, 1991). Radio indeed was the most widely-used information resource in the areas of rural Kenya she studied, and therefore, it holds promise for the channel of delivery of development information. Moreover, because the radio is their primary information resource, households put a priority on the purchase of batteries to keep their radios operational.

When asked how they obtained advice on agricultural questions at present, all of those interviewed, both men and women, stated that their most frequently-used information resource was advice from their neighbours. Indeed, of the 216 interviewees in the sample, none had ever had an extensionist visit his/her farm!

Interviewees, both men and women, indicated that they would listen to programmes which would give them advice and information on agricultural practices - if such information were broadcast, which they did not perceive it to be at present. However, they also stated that their preferred way of listening to such programming, if given the opportunity, would be as participants in radio listening groups which included an extension advisor.

They believed it important to have a means of "talking back" to their radios, either by being able to ask a local resource to answer any question as they might have, or to communicate directly with the programme producers.

One important learning from this study, beyond the interviewees' enthusiasm for two-way communication with the radio, was the fact that female members in the households had far less access to, and little, if any, control of the radio medium (Ngechu, 1992). Because women constitute by far the greatest percentage of the practising smallholder farmers in Kenya (more than 70%, according to Ngechu's research), and since they are effectively excluded from obtaining information from the male-dominated extension system by the cultural practices of the tribal system<sup>4</sup>, women's current problem of access to information resources is acute.

On the strength of the information gathered in the feasibility study, the IDRC has now funded a major pilot study of the use of radio listening groups to improve farmer adoption of development information. The initial intention was to provide exclusively agricultural

information. The initial intention was to provide exclusively agricultural information, but if the farmers themselves made the programming decisions, the subject matter to be addressed in the programmes would not be so constrained. If, for example, a radio listening group determines that its most pressing problem concerns the community's access to health care, then the programming must adapt itself to the listeners' expressed needs.

The intent in this experiment was to determine whether the radio medium can be democratized in Kenya in the same way and to the same extent that it has been in Zimbabwe through the DTR project. The methods for attempting this democratization is to turn the old dominant communication paradigm (Source-Medium-Receiver) of the 1950s and 1960s "on its head" to create a dialogue between the radio audience and the programme producers through feedback from the listeners in the RLGs, to see whether such a dialogue can increase smallholder farmers' adoption of development information.

Another important component in the design of this project is its evaluation strategy. Prior to the production of the programmes to be broadcast, the initial radio listening groups formed as part of the project will decide what kind of format they prefer for the programmes. Three sample programmes with different presentation modes (for example, "magazine" segments; drama and songs; formal instruction) will be produced for the groups' evaluation. The remainder of the programmes will be produced according to the groups selection of preferred presentation style. When the programmes begin to be produced for broadcast, the RLGs will evaluate the content of each programme aired in the series, and suggest future programming subjects.

Since the DTR project in Zimbabwe has been operational for more than five years, it will be able to offer important advice for the newly-developed RLGs project in Kenya. IDRC is ensuring that the two projects develop a close information exchange, so that each can build on the others learning by having the two project leaders visit the other's project.

These two experiments represent a careful attempt to transform a mass medium into an "alternative" medium: a community-driven information resource. The development, execution and participants'

evaluation of the Kenyan experiment will be carefully documented, so that there will be a chronicle of the Radio Farm Forum model for the future. In this case, there will be important records of the usefulness—or lack of usefulness—of radio listening groups as a development tool.

## **Applicability of RLG Experiments to Support Infant and Young Child Nutrition**

What is the relevance of these two experiments for reaching women in grassroots communities with information about infant and young child nutrition?

The Radio Listening Group model—both as it has been structured in Zimbabwe and as it is being structured in Kenya—holds promise of being able to increase women's interest in and use of nutrition-related information in the selection and preparation of food for their families.

In most cultures in the African continent, women are solely responsible for providing food for their children. They are the farmers and the cooks, and they determine how to manage the family inputs to meet their children's nutritive requirements. If one can motivate the women of Africa to discover the role of nutrition-related information in the health of their children, and if the women can then participate in a dialogue with nutrition experts through the radio medium, one can anticipate that child health will be sustainably improved. Mothers must be the target of such an information campaign.

The DTR project in Zimbabwe is targeted exclusively to rural women. The evaluation of the DTR project has provided evidence that women are willing and able—sometimes in the face of extreme difficulties<sup>5</sup>—to invest time and effort in a radio-focussed development activity, and that they believe the effort is worth the return of their investment<sup>6</sup>. Since reaching and creating a dialogue with women would be a primary aim of any communication strategy attempting to improve infant and young child feeding, it is important to know that it can be done—effectively and over a considerable period of time.

The potential applicability of these experiments, however, relate to their participatory focus:

...Too much emphasis has been placed on the informational value of individuals and very little importance given to the organizational value of communication for communities. There is much more to benefit in treating a community as the unit of manipulation rather than individuals since many innovations are beyond the resources of individuals (Hornik, 1988, quoted in Melkote, 1991).

The community being created through the Farm Forum model is the listening group, which has been formed to plan, contribute to, listen to, respond to—and, indeed, to participate in the production of—problem-solving programming targeted to the groups: the RLC

and RLG communities have their unique sets of priorities and values, drawn from co-operative discussions within the individual groups and, sometimes, the larger communities in which they exist, and they have evolved a method of dialogue which makes those groups the ultimate evaluators of the programmes broadcast.

As Ascroft and Masilela (1989), explain, these sorts of projects hold the promise of genuine beneficiary participation in the development process; they fit their definition of development support communication, whose effect is "...to create a climate of mutual understanding between benefactors and beneficiaries" (1989: p. 17). The promise of democratised programming on national broadcasting systems is that the listeners cease to be passive recipients of exogenous messages; they begin to participate in and take responsibility for improvements which they perceive to be important in the quality of their lives.

For those concerned with improving the quality of infant and young child feeding in a Third World context, the importance of attempting to develop community-based messages based on the perception, espoused needs and interests of the communities themselves cannot be over-emphasised. The value of understanding the "cultural landscape" (George, 1991) when undertaking development support communication is captured in the following anecdote:

*I remember in my second year of teaching in a small Eskimo fishing town... the frustrations of the newly arrived... teacher who had the classroom next to mine. He claimed that he "couldn't get through to the Eskimos" because of "deficiencies in hearing"— and this...was reason for his yelling, screaming and pounding the blackboard day after day. After several weeks... I told him about Eskimo eyebrows. Eskimos give sharp definition to "yes", "no" and "maybe" answers with their face and eyebrows.*

*He had come there expecting verbal feedback. When he didn't get it, he assumed that it was because of bad hearing among the Eskimos, so he raised his voice. There is a saying in that part of Alaska that white people are craziest when they first get to a village (Schwartz, 1974).*

By facilitating the audience's participation in the message selection, programme design and theory, the RLC/RLG model encourages cultural relevance for the listeners and keen interest in the messages to be broadcast. Whether the promise of the model will hold up under the scrutiny of participatory evaluation still needs to be demonstrated, but the potential seems to warrant support.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Social mobilization is a term used extensively by UNICEF to describe its programmes targeted to communities to generate and sustain selected patterns of action deemed to be beneficial in major development sectors: Health, population and nutrition. Some of the best discussions published to date about the challenges involved in social mobilization programmes are contained in McKee (1992), *Social Mobilization and Social Marketing in Developing Communities*.

<sup>2</sup> IDRC funds action research in a variety of development fields—health, environment and natural resources, information and communications and social sciences. The modus operandi of the centre is responsive: it funds research on development problems which the Third World researcher themselves consider to be pressing national needs. Therefore, the concept of participatory problem-solving (i.e. the self-development paradigm) is a familiar one to the Centre.

<sup>3</sup> Women's NGOs in the neighbouring countries of Malawi, Zambia and Lesotho have been asking FAMWEZ to assist them in replications of the DTR model in their countries.

<sup>4</sup> Among the Kikuyu and Embu peoples, who were the subjects of this study, male strangers cannot approach women in a household directly. They must address the women through the males of the household.

<sup>5</sup> The current evaluation of the DTR has revealed that some of the RLC members travel as many as fifteen kilometres to attend the weekly meeting and listen to the broadcast.

<sup>6</sup> When asked why they travel so far to attend the meetings, one group of women replied, "Before we had the Radio Listening Club, we had to walk long distances to get clean water. Now we have a borehole."—as reported by the FAMWEZ Coordinating Committee.