



[Vol. 22, No. 3 \(October 1994\)](#)

Active Listening for African Farmers

by Elizabeth Smith in Harare

In East and Southern Africa, rural farmers are often far removed from services that can answer their information needs. Fortunately, the Farm Radio Network (FRN) brings up-to-date and practical information about agriculture and health as close as the nearest radio set.

The FRN is the Zimbabwe-based partner of the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (DCFRN), a non-governmental organization located in Toronto, Canada. Established in 1979, DCFRN operates as an information exchange network in 110 developing countries. It relies not only on radio broadcasters, but on a variety of "rural communicators" to disseminate the latest research results on health, nutrition and agriculture. The material is prepared in the form of radio scripts, which are found easy to work with by health workers, agriculture extension officers, journalists and teachers alike.

Two years ago, DCFRN's executive director, Elizabeth Wilson, secured IDRC's support for a project intended to decentralize the network. In Wilson's view, real development would come when the organization's Southern counterparts had set up self-sustaining information networks. She foresaw DCFRN's African partner extending and improving the regional membership base, while DCFRN continued to provide institutional support and professional training.

LOCALIZING SCRIPTS

The office in Harare, Zimbabwe, the first of DCFRN's partnerships, addresses several important objectives. More effective participants can be identified in the region and better responses can be made to their information requests. Decentralization allows for translations into local languages, thereby increasing the number of language groups served. Finally, it permits local experts, such as Livai Matarirano, Program Manager for the African office, to produce scripts better suited to the needs of local farmers.

"The advantages of localization are that you can do seasonal things," says Matarirano. "When developing scripts here, you know where it is raining, what's happening. For instance, in Zimbabwe and Zambia we have recently had rat and mice problems. We know that people are listening for alternative solutions."

In East and Southern Africa, FRN scripts are distributed to almost 200 rural communicators working in 11 countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe). The scripts are translated from English into local languages and broadcast on local radio programs. Some rural communicators turn the scripts into poems, posters, videos, films, plays, puppet shows or simply use them as handouts in their extension classes. The multiplier effect means that millions of people are reached about matters that directly affect their lives.

What is the content of these scripts? According to Matarirano, the Network collects practical information on "everything that affects the farming family." For example, a recent FRN package distributed from Zimbabwe contained scripts with titles such as "Protect stored beans from weevils," based on information

from a Guatemalan NGO; "Traditional, hybrid and improved crops," developed by an American farmer with community development experience in South Africa; and "Keep your cattle in good condition with poultry manure," written by Matarirano himself.

"It is the Network's contention that better than average technology has been developed by village-level farmers somewhere in the developing world and this technology is applicable elsewhere if similar conditions exist," says Matarirano.

"This kind of information can be gathered and distributed to communicators who can disseminate it for the benefit of small-scale farmers."

ESSENTIAL FEEDBACK

Rural communicators who apply to participate in FRN are accepted based on how they plan to interact with the small farmer and on how many people they can reach. A critical aspect of their involvement comes after the scripts are distributed, in the "feedback" phase. Participants must complete a simple questionnaire, commenting on the scripts received, indicating how they used them, and suggesting topics for future packages. Those who do not return the questionnaire no longer receive the script packages, which are sent out free, four times a year.

Matarirano says the feedback tells him that the participants greatly appreciate the script packages because of their clarity and simplicity of style. More importantly, "the information provided fills a vacuum," he adds.

The son of a farmer himself, Matarirano is well versed with their need for information. He also saw the need before joining FRN in his work as a training officer with the Zimbabwe Ministry of Agriculture's extension service, Agritex.

And Matarirano is keenly aware of the popularity of radio as a medium for agricultural information. Recent statistics claim that in Africa there is one radio for every 20 people, compared to one newspaper for every 200 people. Despite problems with batteries and the quality of transmissions, there is no doubt that many people are being reached through the network's radio broadcasts and its rural communicators.

Those same communicators send suggestions for scripts by the dozen to both the Harare and Toronto offices. Other ideas and information for scripts come from a variety of sources, including universities, colleges, and training and research institutions in the region. Libraries, journals and manuals are also scoured for new agricultural developments.

ACCURACY IS PARAMOUNT

Whatever the source, every script idea must be rigorously verified for accuracy. According to Elizabeth Wilson, who recently visited the FRN office, this task is extremely important. "For instance, if you're mixing something for a pesticide spray, and you don't check, you could kill your plants!" Checking is done by experts in Canada and again when the scripts are sent to Zimbabwe, where the FRN's advisory committee meets to thoroughly review the scripts, revising as necessary, or dropping some entirely if they are considered inappropriate to the region. However, only two scripts have been put aside to date.

"I think we put our scripts together very well," says Wilson. "Every detail you could possibly know is in the script. If something needs stirring for 10 minutes, we say so -- we don't just say stir."

Presently, the core scripts are issued from DCFRN's Toronto office, based on proven suggestions from developing countries. In Zimbabwe, Matarirano is backed by an eight-member advisory committee with expertise in agriculture, nutrition, health, extension, women's affairs, appropriate technology and journalism. After selecting and editing relevant topics, about 12 scripts are sent out, and usually at least one of them is written locally. Questionnaires are also sent out, along with the African edition of the

DCFRN newsletter Voices, written and compiled by Matarirano.

DCFRN's close connection with IDRC has proven beneficial for script development. For example, a recent question on how to grow bamboo, was answered through IDRC's bamboo and rattan network. DCFRN has also just received support from IDRC to write scripts based on 101 Technologies, an IDRC publication describing successful appropriate technologies.

In Zimbabwe, the FRN operates out of the Wensleydale Farmer Training Centre in Macheke, a mixed farming district some 120 km from Harare. The centre's training director, Mr. Shadreck Tsimba, says that only a few people knew about DCFRN before it became decentralized. "Now a lot of people know about it. I've seen it grow; it's an achievement." Tsimba, who is also the Chairman of FRN's advisory committee, says future plans include targeting 10 communities, initially in Zimbabwe, to monitor their participation in the Network.

Matarirano also has ambitious plans for the regional network, including doubling the production of packages from four to eight per year, improving the communication skills of participants through more workshops on effective radio, print and face-to-face communications, and finding and translating more sources of information. Within the next three years, he would like to have active participants in positions as national coordinators, accountable for implementing the program in each country.

He also hopes to select a more appropriate name since the words "Farm Radio Network" do not embrace the many innovative forms of communication used to pass on the information from the scripts.

WOMEN AND THE FRN: A VALUED AUDIENCE

Recognizing the importance of women in agriculture, the FRN makes extra efforts to have women participants. Many of the health, safety and nutrition scripts are written with women in mind. Women in Zimbabwe regularly use FRN's scripts through Listeners Clubs, served by the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC). Through funding from a German organization, some 50 clubs were formed throughout rural Zimbabwe, and each provided with a radio cassette player. Broadcasts of 30 minutes are made weekly in Shona and Ndebele. Mr. Eddington Mhonda, a member of FRN's advisory committee, does the Shona broadcast every Monday. Mhonda then drives to the 29 clubs in his area to respond to questions generated by the broadcast. According to Mhonda, the groups are 80% women, and all except one have a woman monitor.

Mhonda recently took Elizabeth Wilson and Livai Matiranaro to one such Listeners Club in Mutoko district. They discovered that the women actually met in the morning to prepare for the afternoon broadcast and to work on projects based on information from the broadcasts. The projects include crushing sunflower seeds for valuable cooking oil, fencebuilding and poultry raising.

At 2 p.m., the women religiously set the radio player under a tree, listened intently to Mhonda's broadcast, then went about taping their queries on cassettes provided to the groups, queries that form the basis for his next program.

"This is something special about the network: people can be in touch with each other," says Wilson. "An important factor that participants mention is fellowship -- being part of something that's all over the world."

Mhonda added that there has been a discernible change in interests expressed by women since the Listeners Clubs began in 1990. Whereas before they had wanted information on things like recipes, they were now requesting information on property rights, divorce, the loss of traditions, and how to beat the high cost of living.

"They see now that somebody is listening -- they have found someone who can give an answer. They have lost their fear of authority," comments Mhonda. In many cases, the broadcasts are also an effective way for

illiterate women to be informed without embarrassment over their lack of skills in reading and writing.

THE MAKINGS OF A GOOD FARM RADIO SCRIPT

The FRN chooses ideas that:

- aim at increasing food supplies and improving the quality of life of the small farmer and his/her family
- are practical and simple enough to be communicated clearly (on radio, in classroom, person-to-person)
- have been developed, tested and/or proven in the developing world or are widely adaptable for use in areas of the developing world other than the area of its origin
- cost little or nothing, requiring only resources ordinarily available to the small scale farmer
- do not require any inputs that may be unavailable to the farmer, e.g. chemicals, drugs, inoculants, improved varieties, new plant species, animals, etc.
- require little or no technical help to implement.

For more information, contact:

Livai Matarirano
Farm Radio Network
P.O. Box 308
Harare, Zimbabwe
Tel: (263 4)42610 Fax: (263 4) 731901
email: Matarirano@mango.apc.org

Elizabeth Wilson
Developing Countries Farm Radio Network
40 Dundas Street West
Box 12, Suite 227B
Toronto, Ont. Canada M5G 2C2
Telephone/fax: 416 593 3752

Reference:

101 Technologies. From the South for the South,
IDRC 1992, 231 pp., spiral, 5 x 11", ISBN 0-88936-656-X, CA \$7.95.

Unless otherwise stated, all articles and photos may be freely reproduced providing suitable credit is given.

ISSN 0315-9981. This magazine is listed in the Canadian Magazine Index.

- [Subscription information](#)
- [Return to the IDRC Reports homepage](#)
- [Return to the IDRC homepage](#)

Copyright © International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada
Please send your comments to [editor of Reports](#).