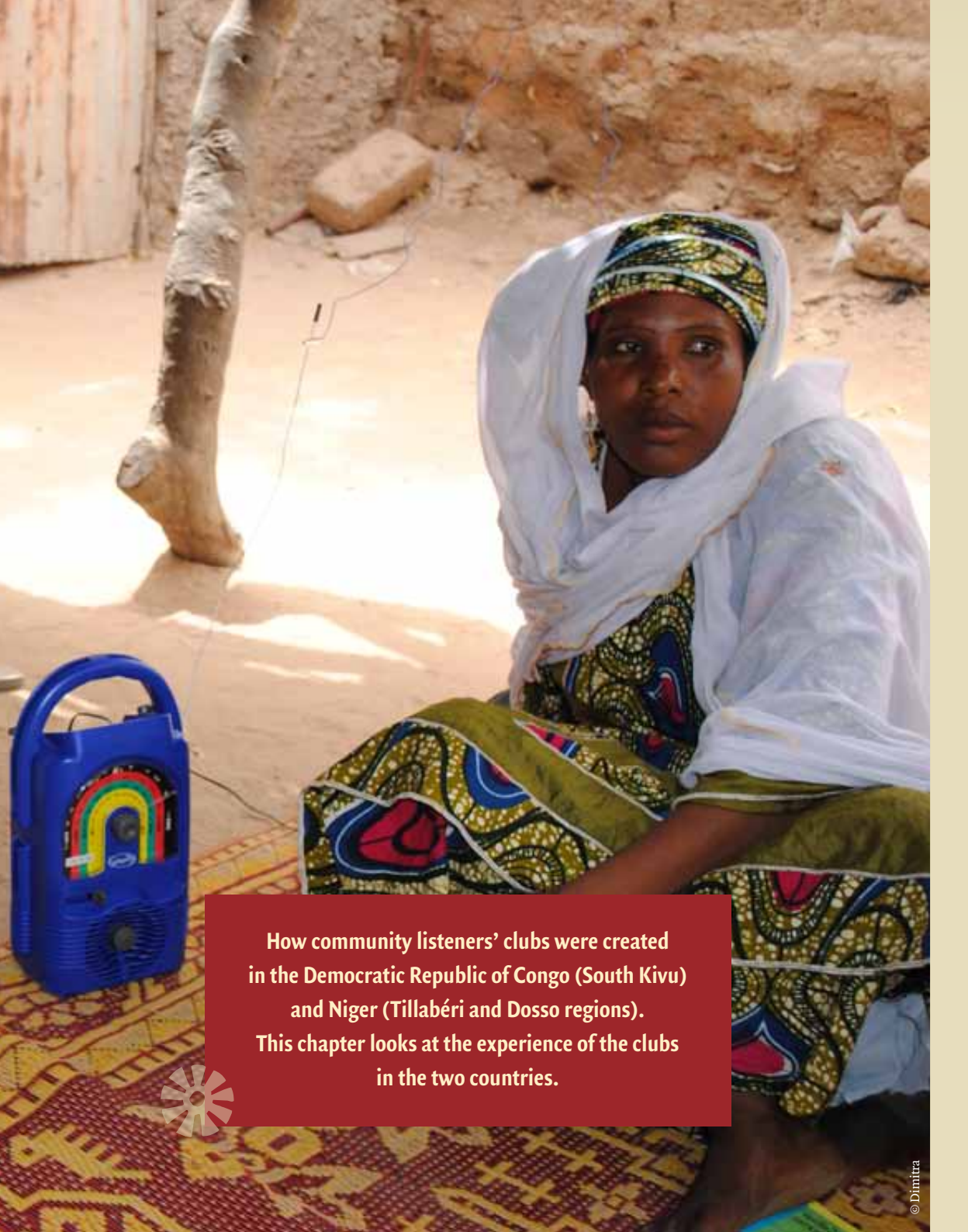


Live from the listeners' clubs



How community listeners' clubs were created in the Democratic Republic of Congo (South Kivu) and Niger (Tillabéri and Dosso regions). This chapter looks at the experience of the clubs in the two countries.



Democratic Republic of Congo



Scarred by decades of war, the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the most devastated regions on the planet. There is still much to be done to improve the status and livelihoods of rural communities, especially women.

Many reports document the situation of sexual violence in South Kivu. In its last report on the state of the world population 2010, UNFPA notes that according to local health clinics in the province of South Kivu, an average of 40 women are raped each day.

Exacerbating the situation is the fact that fields have not been tended during the conflicts. Crops and small livestock have been pillaged by combattants. When women attempted to take up farming again, the “mosaic” disease, which struck the region in 2003, devastated the cassava, the main crop and food source of people in the province.

It is against this challenging backdrop that the Congolese non-governmental organization (NGO)

Samwaki, Sauti ya Mwanamke Kijijini (*The voice of the rural woman, in Swahili*) is working. Today, it supports and coordinates nine federations of community listeners’ clubs in the eight rural territories of the province of South Kivu: Walungu (two clubs), Shabunda, Mwenga, Idjwi, Kalehe, Uvira, Fizi and Kabare.



Mamans Majambere: “Women together”

Samwaki is active in South Kivu, where, in 2002, it began meeting rural communities in order to make them more aware of the importance of sharing information and knowledge on key themes such as HIV/AIDS, violence against women, food security, etc. In each village, women had formed groups called “Mamans Majambere” or “Mamans Mulungano” – Women for Development or Women Together. Each of these groups carried out its own project, with collective fields and a mutual aid fund. In spite of all this, Samwaki was eventually forced to accept a bitter truth: even though they were very determined, all these rural women remained cut off from the rest of the world. They were confined in traditions, a village and a system where knowledge was scant.

Each “Mamans Majambere” group had its goals and field of intervention, but Samwaki observed that the groups were largely unaware of each other. So they set about regrouping them around several “communication axes” and creating mechanisms to share information between them.

“The communication axes make a link between people in the same community and between villages grouped together for geographical reasons,” explains Adeline Nsimire, coordinator of Samwaki. *“These exchanges enable people to meet each other; there is an understanding between local men and women in the field. Women carry out a range of activities and we have supported them with training material. We have also started a farming and livestock activity and revolving credit system.”*

But the discussions between groups sometimes came up against the problem of lack of information. National radio did not reach the villages and the experts were all in the towns. The only access to

knowledge was community radio, the cheapest form of media and the only one available in rural areas.

The following year, in 2003, Dimitra and Samwaki met. *“I saw Boniface and Adeline arrive, after a night travelling by boat,”* recalls Eliane Najros, coordinator of Dimitra. *“Adeline was 8 months pregnant at the time, and they had come especially from Bukavu all the way to Goma to tell us about what Samwaki was doing.”*

After this first contact, Samwaki became the focal point for Dimitra in South Kivu.

Samwaki conducted an initial baseline survey of the situation regarding information and communication. It emerged that all the community radios were concentrated in the city of Bukavu, at the expense of rural areas. These radios rarely dealt with subjects of interest to rural communities, especially subjects that might interest women. For example, the villagers had little information about HIV/AIDS, a scourge in a region scarred by years of conflict. Also, the radio stations did nothing to open the door to discussion or an exchange of ideas with these communities, even though they were supposed to be their target audience.

The decision was taken: Samwaki and Dimitra would try to fill the existing gap between radio and rural women. The first step was to be in July 2005, when six community radios and 25 farmers’ organizations from the province of South Kivu met, in preparation for a workshop planned for the following year. This first face-to-face encounter between journalists and rural women was to pave the way for future collaboration between community radios and farmers’ organizations, and for recognition of the role played by each of these groups in the development of the province.

Women's organizations meet community radios

The process of creating listeners' clubs was started in the field. In each village visited, Samwaki identified leaders, accepted and chosen by their community, who were ready to serve its interests and had good listening and communication skills.

Two leaders, a man and a woman, were chosen by each community. A total of 18 people thus became the intermediaries between Samwaki and the rural community, their role being to organize debates to identify the themes and problems to be discussed, with a special focus on gender issues.

In February 2006, another key event was organized: Samwaki arranged a meeting in Bukavu between these 18 intermediaries and 60 representatives from civil society organizations, scientists from agricultural research centres, authorities, journalists and staff from community radio stations in the province (Radio Maendeleo in Bukavu, Radio Mitumba in Uvira, Radio Mutanga in Shabunda, Radio APIDE in Mwenga, Radio Maria Malkia, Radio Kahuzi, etc.). This workshop, attended by as many women as men, was supported by gender and communication experts from the FAO-Dimitra project, the Panos Institute Paris and other experts from development agencies (UNFPA, UNDP, Canadian International Development Agency, UNIFEM, GTZ, etc.).

The agenda included exchanging views so as to have a better understanding of one another's situation and finding the best method of communication. When the five-day workshop ended, the participants agreed on several courses of action: to create community listeners' clubs and strengthen synergies and exchanges between community radio stations and women's organizations. The community listeners' clubs would enable isolated rural communities,

especially women, to take part in the activities of the community radio stations, make their voices heard and benefit from the broadcasts and programmes.

Back in their village, the 18 leaders and the various representatives from the organizations explained how the clubs would work and invited each woman and man to take part. In a region where the main focus is on surviving to live another day, one might have expected the proposal to earn a lukewarm response. But villagers, men and women alike, were quick to show their interest in becoming involved in the clubs.

The distinction between listeners' clubs as a driving force for change and the radio fan clubs already present in the region was also clarified. "The fundamental distinction," explains Yannick De Mol, FAO-Dimitra Project Officer, "is that the clubs of listeners (*"clubs d'auditeurs"*) revolve around a radio while the listeners' clubs (*"clubs d'écoute"*) are centred on people."

The birth of the listeners' clubs


General assemblies were held in public locations, at markets or on football pitches. All public places could be used, so long as they were not identified with an organization close to a religious, social, ethnic or political group. The community listeners' clubs were born.

The activities, carried out by Samwaki, received technical support from FAO-Dimitra and financial support from the King Baudouin Foundation and GTZ-Santé from September 2006 onwards, as part of the "Strengthening community radios and their listeners' clubs to help combat HIV/AIDS in South Kivu and Katanga" project.

The next stage involved equipping the clubs. Samwaki and Dimitra distributed communication tools (CD players, professional recorders and

mobile telephones) to club members and partner community radio stations, while 45 wind-up and solar-powered radio receivers were supplied to the clubs. These highly resistant large blue radio sets have a powerful output, and are easy to use. Sixty turns of the handle and you have one hour's radio listening!

The club system is based on individual and collective radio listening by community groups of men and women who later discuss the subject, call the radio, asking for additional explanations and suggest ideas for themes to be dealt with in future broadcasts.



Shockwaves: honey for the community

In 2008, members of the listeners' club in Kalehe, a territory situated some 70 kilometres north of Bukavu, listened together to a programme developed by Samwaki and aired by Radio Maendeleo on honey production and its importance for health and income generation. In this region, honey is consumed as a food stuff and is used to treat a number of diseases in children. Discussions at the club meeting following the broadcast focused on the possibility of producing honey at local level, to avoid having to travel to Bukavu to get supplies. The expert who had appeared on the radio programme was invited to explain how to construct beehives. In the end, four women launched a pilot beekeeping project with traditional hives. They had never imagined that they had the capacity to produce honey and supply the territory. But that is just what they are now doing.

Even though groups can listen to any frequency, and later give an account of what they have heard to other members, privileged relationships have developed with five community radio stations: Radio Maendeleo (Bukavu), Radio Mitumba (Uvira), Radio Mutanga (Shabunda), Radio APIDE (Mwenga) and Radio Bubusa FM (Mugogo). *"Women can 'order' subjects for radio broadcasts; they can also make them themselves with their dictaphones,"* explains Adeline Nsimire. *"They record their thoughts and the cassettes are sent to partner radios which will broadcast them. Members living close to the station can also go and express their opinions directly on the radio."*

Three of the nine clubs (in Fizi, Idjwi and Kalehe) are not linked to any community radio in the sense of a formal partnership. However, the clubs in Idjwi and Kalehe receive Radio Maendeleo which broadcasts from Bukavu. And in Fizi, you can listen to Radio Umoja in Baraka and tune in to the national radio & television (RTNC) station in Fizi. As with the other clubs, they conduct individual and/or group listening sessions and discuss the content of the information they have been able to follow. Their discussion is then recorded and their opinions broadcast by partner community radios in the project, or by other radios, on an informal basis.

Several years have passed since the setting up of these listeners' clubs in South Kivu, and their impact on the life of rural communities is considerable, especially for women.

At first, discussions focused on the struggle against HIV/AIDS, *"Before, women victims hid themselves. They were ashamed,"* explains Jocelyne M'Mananga, president of the Ruhinduke community listeners' club in Mugogo. *"Now they come to ask advice and help and to tell their story."*



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Subsequent sessions went far beyond the health sector. “The clubs showed the importance of joining forces,” remarks Adeline Nsimire. “They open up discussion, people can speak without discrimination. These

discussions are conducted with full cooperation from the local authorities. The chiefs take part, and if they cannot come, they send someone to represent them.”

Rural women, agents of change

Free space for Faïda: with the money, my children go to school



Faïda is one of 250 members of the Mugogo community listeners’ club. “Before the club discussions, I was ignorant. I ate all the produce from my fields without saving anything. Nowadays, I fertilise my land with droppings from the guinea pigs I bought. I have increased output and been able to sell some of the surplus. With the money, my children go to school.”

The listeners’ clubs have also strengthened the capacities of members to get organized and identify and communicate their needs. Community radios take better account of the expectations of rural communities, opening up air space to women and allowing constant interaction between them. The women become not just actresses of development, but also agents of change.



Samwaki stresses the fact that discussions need to be followed up by concrete actions and results, such as an increase in voluntary screening for HIV/AIDS, a fairer sharing of tasks between men and women or an improvement in agricultural output. As Sophie, a farmer in Mugogo observes: “radio has given power to my activities.”

Jocelyne, president of the Rhuhinduke listeners’ club in Mugogo, claims that discussions and radio can lead to very concrete progress: “For example, we talked about cultivating climbing beans and using organic fertiliser from the compost we made ourselves. We now plant the beans in rows, a few centimetres apart. And the yields are much higher”.

If words can provide food, they can also give courage and dignity. These women, who had no opportunity of making their voices heard before, have found in radio and the listeners’ clubs a channel for expressing their opinions and expectations. This has enabled men to become aware of women’s capacities. Understanding the benefit of joining forces to tackle challenges, they now encourage their wives to become involved in the clubs. The women now dare to speak. And to speak about everything. While sex traditionally is a taboo subject, radio has made it possible to shatter groundless beliefs about HIV/AIDS and sexual abuse. Before, some traditional chiefs and communities believed that rape, which is seen as a cause for shame by the family of the raped woman, was not an offence, let alone a crime.

The members of the listeners’ clubs are well aware of the importance of these spaces. For Angeline, a farmer, “victims can come out of hiding and forget their shame. Women can reveal their problems to some members of the listeners’ clubs with complete confidentiality.” After discussions at the club where she is a member,

SHOCKWAVES

Sugarcane versus market gardening

The Rhuuyubak’Eka listeners’ club in Bugobe, Kabare, met to examine the impact on food security of the rapid increase of sugarcane cultivation in the area. From the discussions it emerged that men were taking over fertile wetlands to plant sugarcane. That way they earned money which was often not used for the family.

This land grabbing has contributed to a very significant drop in household food security, since women have often lost their capacity to grow crops, now that they have no fields to sow. The listeners’ club carried out an awareness-raising campaign to discourage sugarcane cultivation, but the results were unsatisfactory because men, who were the landowners, were both instigators and actors in growing this crop.

So the listeners’ club met the territory’s administrative and traditional authorities to bring the problem to their attention. These officials proposed applying taxes on sugarcane growers that were close to or higher than the revenues they expected to earn. As a result, in the wetlands of Bugobe and Mudika-dika, an estimated 70% of land has been returned to growing fruit and vegetables.

Gertrude pinpointed the importance of prevention for herself and her children. “I am now going to see the doctor, something I didn’t consider before, because now I understand that diseases exist, and that they are not curses cast by a neighbour.”



Community radios are also making progress thanks to the partnerships forged with the rural communities. They are gradually adopting a more participatory approach in their programmes and incorporating a gender perspective, presenting the opinions of both women and men. They are more sensitive to the importance of avoiding prejudice. Radio facilitator Dieudonné stresses that “radio works for the community”. The men and women radio staff have received training and Samwaki attempts to provide follow-up, despite a high turnover of staff, most of whom work on a voluntary basis.

Another noteworthy achievement is that the listeners’ clubs in South Kivu have become spaces of peace, where words defuse rancour and old hatreds. The clubs enable people who have had disagreements to talk to each other in a setting where the rules are clear and the atmosphere reassuring. In the words of Ruth, who belongs to the Mushinga listeners’ club: “The clubs are also meeting places. People who were once enemies find themselves working together in the community fields and talking. Working and discussing together have contributed to peaceful cohabitation and to the development of more and more ‘peace havens’.”

But these havens are fragile. And the region has already lived through the bitter experience of radio waves being used for destructive ends. That is one of the fears of Eliane Najros, coordinator of Dimitra: “that there wouldn’t be an organization or structure anymore to provide guidance to the clubs, in case one of them goes off the rails. Since words are potentially powerful weapons, they can also be dangerous. We need to set extremely clear goals for these listeners’ clubs. There shouldn’t be an organization that controls, but there needs to be an assurance that the information which circulates is beneficial to the development of all.”



SHOCKWAVES

Solidarity fund

At Lurhala, a village close to Bukavu, the listeners’ club has set up a solidarity fund. Each member – mainly women – makes a weekly contribution, in cash or in kind. That subsequently gives them the right to use the fund to pay medical expenses in the case of childbirth or if one of their children falls ill. The initiative has proved so successful that the fund is now able to provide cash advances for ceremonies such as weddings, christenings and even funerals.



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COMMUNITY LISTENERS' CLUBS | STEPPING STONES FOR ACTION IN RURAL AREAS

FAO-DIMITRA





Radio Bubusa FM, an open space for women

When Dimitra met Adeline Nsimire and Boniface Bahizire in Goma in 2003, they already talked about launching the radio station of their dreams. It would be a radio station in a rural area. A radio that would be the voice of women. A radio to and for them. Waves from another world.

The dream took root. On 4 January 2008, in the village de Mugogo, about thirty kilometres from Bukavu, a woman spoke. Radio Bubusa FM, “the voice of rural women”, a community radio for rural women, went on air for the first time.

The radio station offered information on themes of health and food security, including the spread of HIV/AIDS, in rural areas. It broadcast for six hours each day in two sessions (morning and evening), in an area that was so far not covered by the airwaves. Women are highly active in producing content in the Mashi language, in which 70% of programmes are broadcast, compared with 20% in Swahili and 10% in French. Some listeners’ clubs, such as the one in Mushinga, record radio programmes in the community fields and send them twice a month to Radio Bubusa FM. Their equipment has been provided with support from the FAO-Dimitra project, the King Baudouin Foundation and the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC).

Two years after airing its first broadcast, the radio station has moved into a building better

suitable for radio production. It now broadcasts from a house specially built for the station by the Réseau des radios et télévisions communautaires de l’Est du Congo (RATECO) with funding from UNDP. It is located in Mishaka, in the territory of Walungu, not far from the commercial centre of Mugogo.

Two extraordinary events marked the history of Radio Bubusa FM in 2010.

The sun and wind carry women’s voices

Kalinga (50 years-old) was sceptical: “I don’t believe in any magic that converts the sun’s rays into electricity. It will take a long time before your technicians can convince me,” she said. But in July 2010, Radio Bubusa FM replaced its oil-thirsty generator. Nowadays, the radio station is equipped with solar panels (see photo on following page). Even better, a wind-power kit serves as back-up should the sun’s rays prove too weak or in case of breakdown.

An ideal rural solution, Bubusa FM is the first community radio to have been set up by women in the province of South Kivu and now becomes the first radio to use renewable energy. In a setting where energy supply is both a major problem and expense, it marks considerable progress. The move will ensure that Bubusa FM is able to broadcast on a continuous basis.



Excellent communication strategies

On 12 August 2010, in Johannesburg (South Africa), Radio Bubusa FM and the community listeners' clubs of South Kivu received the second prize in the 2010 Annual Award for Excellence in HIV and AIDS Communication in Africa. The prize, awarded by the African Network for Strategic Communication of Health (AfricomNet, based in Kampala, Uganda), rewards innovative organizations for their communication strategies on HIV/AIDS.

Keen to share this recognition with all active community club members, Samwaki organized a ceremony in early September 2010. In the course of the day, the prize was officially presented to the local authorities, radio staff and other members of the community listeners' clubs, as well as to members of Samwaki.

On this occasion, Jocelyne M'Maniga, president of the Ruhinduke listeners' club in Mugogo, reminded those present that before the community listeners' clubs and Radio Bubusa FM were set up, HIV/AIDS had been considered a taboo subject, but "these days, issues linked to HIV/AIDS are the subject of frank and open conversations and discussions in families, churches, schools, community fields, by the river, etc. It is the success that our initiatives on HIV/AIDS have had in breaking this silence that has prompted AfricomNet to recognise them as being some of the most excellent strategies for combating this devastating virus."

To celebrate this international recognition in an appropriate manner, Radio Bubusa FM broadcast a non-stop programme on 4 September 2010 with the general theme (in Mashi): "Rhucikebuk'Esida Rucibikule Lyo Rhuyilwisa": let's avoid AIDS, let's talk about it to combat it more effectively.



The figures speak for themselves: a landlocked country in the heart of the Sahel, Niger ranks 167th out of 169 in the human development index; 63% of the population lives below the poverty line; three out of four poor people are women. This is without taking into account a major structural obstacle for rural communities: the very low rates of literacy and education, with marked disparities between men and women. Many causes are cited to explain these differences between men and women: women being restricted to domestic chores, early marriage, gender bias in labour division, high education costs, lack of equipment, etc.

In addition, access to information and communication for rural communities, which could enable them to increase their knowledge and exchange information and practices, is extremely limited. In rural areas, fewer than half of all households (46.6%) have a radio, and television is only available to 0.5% of the population; 64.4% of women have no access to any form of media, for technical reasons, but also due to social and cultural barriers.¹

In most cases, women do not own a radio set. As a result, they cannot choose what they listen to, or when to listen. Their perspectives, concerns, experiences and areas of interest do not receive radio coverage, even in the case of local radios whose vocation it is to give a voice to the voiceless.

National radio channels can be received, but they are broadcast in French, which is not necessarily understood by all men and women. The information

broadcast is national, and often there are no specific programmes on the problems facing rural women, and even fewer made by women themselves.

Combining literacy and communication

Convinced that better access to information and communication offers an opening to greater involvement in the social, economic and political life of a country, the FAO-Dimitra project and its partner ONG VIE Kande Ni Bayra organized a workshop in Dosso, in December 2006. Called “Rural women, literacy and communication – Literacy training for rural women as a lever for their empowerment and that of their families and for the schooling of girls”, the workshop offered an opportunity to identify the complementarity between literacy and communication when it comes to strengthening women’s capacities and education for young girls in rural areas.

Inspired by the emerging model of the community listeners’ clubs in South Kivu, the workshop “recommended creating synergies between community radio stations and literacy centres to promote rural women’s access to information and communication for development,” explains Ali Abdoulaye, coordinator of ONG VIE.

A pilot project for the creation of listeners’ clubs was launched by ONG VIE in 2009, with technical and financial support from FAO-Dimitra and several donors², taking the literacy training centres as starting point.

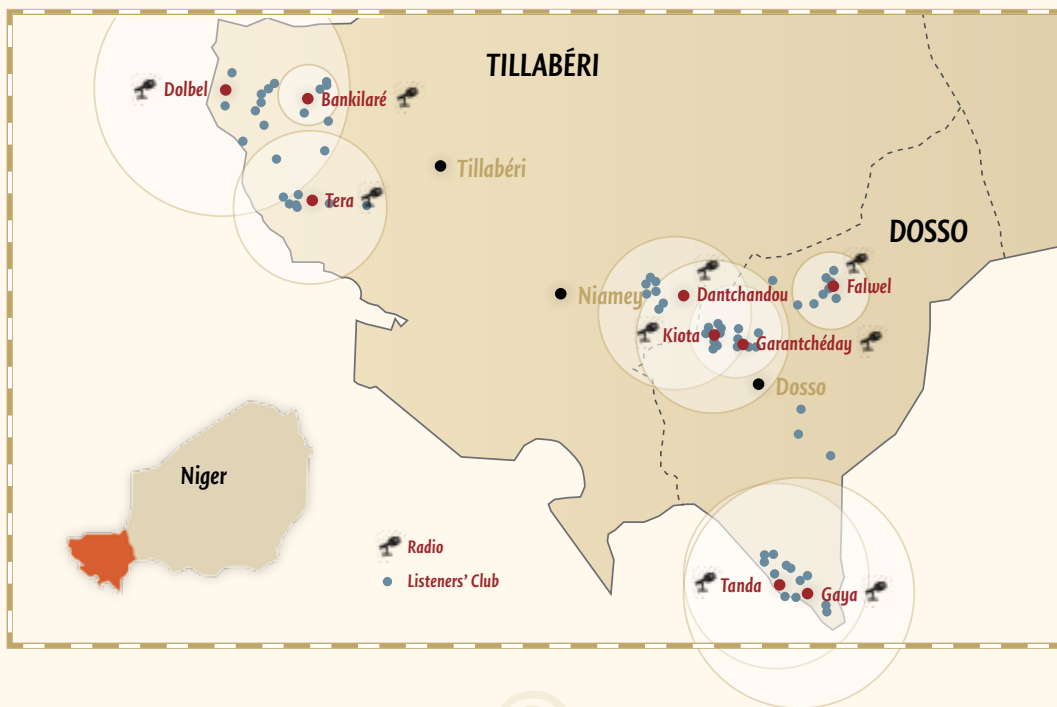


The setting up of listeners' clubs in Niger followed a similar process to that of the clubs in South Kivu and benefited from the experience accumulated by Samwaki in the DRC.

Simple criteria were used to select the villages, such as the motivation of the villagers, the presence of women who had the potential to form a club, the possibility of setting up literacy centres, coverage by a telephone network of the operator partnering with the project, perfect reception of the community radio's programmes. The following regions were thus identified: (i) Tillabéri: Bankilare, Gorououl and Tera (Department of Tera), Dantchandou (Department of Kollo); (ii) Dosso: Tanda and Gaya (Department of Gaya), Falwel (Department of Loga), Dosso and Kiota (Department of Dosso).

Once the areas had been identified, the literacy centres informed their members that listeners' clubs had been set up. "At first, I was at the literacy centre, and then I heard about this club project," explains Mariama Hassane from Fogou. "We were told it would involve both men and women, but with a preference for women. Since I have already made some progress in literacy, I told myself that I would certainly take part in this new initiative to improve my skills."

Solar and wind-up radio sets were made available to club members so they could listen to radio programmes, either taking turns or in group sessions. The women quickly began to discuss the subjects chosen and listened to on the radio.





While collective listening rarely involves more than 20 members, the discussions are open to larger numbers. Club meetings are held on a regular basis, outside the hours of the literacy centres. Mariama explains how it works in Fogou: “Our listeners’ club meets twice a week. I never miss a meeting. It takes between one and two hours for the listening sessions, which start at 8pm. When we are busy working in the fields and preparing the evening meal, we listen to the broadcast from 9 to 10pm.” These are live broadcasts. The broadcasting times are agreed with the radio station, so that they suit the women’s schedules, depending on the time of year and the farming calendar.

Participants in the radio programmes use local languages: Fulfulde, Tamasheq, Zarma and Haoussa. The same radio station can use up to three or four languages, and the language can change during a discussion.

“Each village has its club”, explains Ali Abdoulaye, “At the start, more than 200 women were trained in participatory communication and community leadership. In a village, not everyone can gather around a single radio set because the homes are scattered. So groups are made up according to distance. And the women get together to listen in a pre-arranged place.”

Each club develops its own group listening method. For example, in the rural district of Tanda, each village has two or three listeners’ groups for women and one for men. The women get together in the literacy centre to listen to thematic programmes

“One of the last programmes I listened to talked about fertiliser and conservation techniques. There are different ways of conserving or using fertiliser. The programme explained how to use manure rather than chemical fertiliser”.

Moctare, ONG VIE

“It’s fantastic! Imagine a small village where 60 people sit down to chat about the latest news and swap ideas so that knowledge emerges!” Bello Amadou cultivates millet, sorghum and corn in Tchiota Nazammé. This 50-year-old father-of-two is enthusiastic about the experience. However, his wife does not belong to the club. “She was interested, but there was only a certain number of places. There are three groups of 20 people each. Two groups of women and one of men.”

before discussing amongst themselves to define their position so that they can draw up strategies aimed at bringing about the required changes. If the women decide that a particular theme warrants the opinion or involvement of men from their neighbourhood, they invite them to come and discuss the issue and express their opinion. It may happen that all the groups will meet to make a joint presentation of the knowledge they have acquired and to compare their analysis of it. Sometimes, radio staff will subsequently come to the centre to record the reactions of those taking part and encourage the men and women listeners to talk about other aspects of the theme being discussed, or about a different subject altogether.

In Tera, women take part in discussions at the literacy centre and their conclusions are recorded by the radio and broadcast in the presence of qualified resource persons.

It should be said that although a key aim of the project is to strengthen the position of women within their community, the initiative targets the entire community. Focusing exclusively on women development actors could create tensions with the men of the villages. And when ONG VIE supplied the villages with radio receivers, one-third of them were offered to men, so that they would be fully involved in the project.

In Gassed, the men and women of the village each have their own clubs. They meet once a week for discussions. The clubs have changed the relationships within households, with men and women now speaking freely to one another.

The project also offers help through the women and men facilitators of the literacy centres who will support the listeners' clubs. Mactare works in the Tera area. "In concrete terms, I act as a bridge between the clubs and the radio. We have to explain to the clubs that it is their radio, and that club members must listen to it and call it. The radios are happy to have men and women listeners who follow their programmes." The work of a facilitator involves both organizing and teaching. They mobilise the community and help it with practical issues, but not with the choice of themes.

Agriculture: a key subject

The club members decide which subjects they want to deal with. It may be an issue about which

“ Our last subject? The day before yesterday, we talked about malaria and everything related to it. To overcome the disease, we need to clean up the areas where we live. We were asked to weed all around our houses, since mosquitoes lay their eggs in weeds. It is also important to remove any small containers, old cans and puddles of water near the homes since these are breeding grounds for mosquitoes. That's where they lay their eggs. In the evenings, we must take precautions after the sun goes down, protecting ourselves with mosquito nets, even while we are chatting. In addition, we have learned to detect the first signs of the disease, and as soon as we think someone may be suffering from it, we must quickly take them to the clinic.”

Mariama Hassane, Fogou listeners' club

members would like to have information, one on which they – men or women – have something to say, or they may choose it for some entirely different reason. What interests one club may not necessarily interest another.

“For example, the area of Tchiotia has no mining resources,” explains Ali Abdoulaye. “Since AIDS is not an issue that worries them, the villagers are rarely faced with this subject. But in Téra, where there are traditional gold mines which attract communities from far away, there is a risk of spreading HIV/AIDS. The young people talk about their experiences. People explain what has happened to them and there are discussions.”

While each club chooses its themes, there are some that are inevitable, such as agriculture. “We use radio to communicate about food security. For women and men, it is their prime concern, a question of survival. A week does not go by without this subject being raised. Soil fertility, speculation on crops, where to purchase inputs. All these sub-themes are dealt with in concrete terms. Where can we find these seeds? Should we choose this input or another one?” The discussions and programmes have to be very practical. “In October, there is a great deal of talk about the harvest and discussions about how to avoid selling straight away for a low price.”

It may prove necessary to turn to expert sources, but that is a decision taken by the club members. Each programme is prepared by a journalist or facilitator who researches the subject beforehand and can ask for the help of the FAO office in Niamey if the theme under discussion is appropriate. The journalist prepares the subject and refers to the clubs to sound out their ideas on issues relating to the theme. His or her role is not to do a complete report, but to introduce the main issues, allow experts to give their viewpoint, enable communities to react, ask questions or express a different opinion. This way the skills of the community radio staff are also improved.



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Concrete progress for rural women

One year after the listeners' clubs were launched, observers in the field were already speaking of a small 'revolution'. Moctare claims there has been a real change in the way people think: "women are daring to speak out", a development that represents a tremendous change in rural Niger. Mariama talks about the new freedom she has found. This 28-year-old mother of four children recently travelled to the capital Niamey, to take part in an international meeting and share her knowledge³. "I had never left my village before! Here, I hear voices that are different from those I hear back home. We have been able to meet other people. It has been a very enriching experience."

Ali Abdoulaye adds that "Women never had a voice. They sat behind the men and even when they were asked a direct question, they turned to the men who, being the only ones to have travelled, had a relevant opinion. These days, these same women have become aware of the knowledge they hold. They give their opinions, contradicting viewpoints imposed on them, and get organized so they can be heard and given greater consideration. Women's discussions have shown that they were able to analyse and synthesize."

Men's opinion of women has also evolved. In Borobon village, in the region of Tillabéry, the traditional chief asked several women to attend village meetings. Three of them now take part in these meetings, where important community decisions are taken.



The coordinator of ONG VIE stresses that before the clubs were set up in the village, women did not always see the point of learning to read and write. “They thought that learning these skills would never be of any use to them. In handling new technologies, they discover how essential it is to communicate. To read or write a message. This initiative has led to an important increase of interest in the literacy centres.”

Over and above these advances, the technical skills and knowledge of club members, especially women, have developed in the course of radio programmes and discussions. Practical information is given on food security and themes linked to health and education. Good practices are presented as a model for other clubs.

“The subject of warrantage came up, a strategy of waiting to get better prices,” recalls Ali Abdoulaye. “Cereals

are stored in a warehouse for six months. You receive the market price, but six months later you can go and collect your harvest, sell it at a higher price, pay back the bank and keep the profits. We explain this so that all farmers understand why they should not sell their harvests off cheaply. Some time ago, discussions centred on traditional fertiliser practices; practices such as bush fires are discouraged.”

Mariama also acknowledges the very tangible progress in her daily life. “When we wanted to store onions, they all rotted and you could not sell anything. The subject was discussed and we were given explanations on how to proceed. When you use too much fertiliser, onions rot because they take in too much water. With less fertiliser, they don’t swell as much and remain more compact. When they are harvested, it is important to store onions in a well ventilated place and take the trouble to turn them. As soon as you see one that is rotting, you must remove it quickly.”

The mobile telephone, a tool for development

A practical problem emerged soon after the listeners' clubs were set up: "The women listened to the programme, but when they wanted to express their opinion they had to send someone to the radio station," explains Ali Abdoulaye. "This person had to make a round trip of between 10 and 50 kilometres!" The person chosen would highlight aspects that the club had found important, make a correction to a piece of information or ask for supplementary details. "After two months, with travel proving difficult, the women decided to call by telephone and summarise their ideas in one or two minutes. But this was expensive." ONG VIE approached a telephone company which offered a very reasonable flat rate, ten times better than the market price. "We bought a hands-free phone for each club, with an annual subscription."

This "fleet" of 100 phones can also be used to make free calls to each other and to the nine partner radio stations. "This system has changed the way journalists work. The radios suggest a theme and open up the airwaves, often with a specialist. The women and men can call in during the broadcast to give their reaction. There is systematic live interaction."

Mobile telephones have made a major contribution in boosting participation and interaction between the clubs and the radio, as well as between rural communities. "In the area surrounding our village, there are nine other clubs, and when it rains somewhere, we call one another," explains Bello Amadou. "We contact one another every morning to exchange information such as the loss of livestock, theft, etc."

Dimitra Project Officer Yannick De Mol points to a key aspect of this modern tool: "Of course, the project is not based on a tool as such – even if the telephone offers extraordinary opportunities – but on the interaction between the community and other development stakeholders. What will make this dynamic process sustainable is not the telephone itself, but having a common project for local development."

Another more down-to-earth challenge is looming: the subscription renewal for the telephones. Given that the project has funding for one year, the villagers are pondering how to keep a telephone at their disposal to express their ideas, without being cut off. "Several strategies have been developed in the clubs," explains Ali Abdoulaye. "One of the solutions is a weekly contribution whereby each person gives 100 or 200 francs CFA (0.15 or 0.3 euro) per week." It is a big sacrifice for these rural women. "It's all relative, because these people have very little money," he says. "100 francs each week means 8 euros a year. For these women, there are periods when they can pay this sum in one go, and others when they would have to suspend the contract. Especially during the critical pre-harvest period, when they'll be forced to stop all contributions for three or four months."

Another option has already been implemented by the members of several listeners' clubs who have turned club-owned cellphones into public community telephones: villagers pay a modest price to talk to someone on a cellphone belonging to the same fleet (the call is free), or another telephone (the call is not free but costs less than a call without a subscription). These contributions go into a fund which will help the villagers to pay the subscription by themselves.