

MAKING FARMER PROGRAMMING SMARTER: THE FARM RADIO APPROACH

Alfred Yeboah and Rosemond Ohene



Suppliers of radio extension programmes in Ghana have been supported by Farm Radio International to make their programmes more participatory and engaging for smallholder farmers. With access to interactive, accurate, timely and interesting information, farmers have reported increased yields and incomes. Radio broadcasters have also been able to make their radio programming more financially sustainable.

Cover A radio listener group in Aworopata community in Ghana's Brong-Ahafo region

In Ghana, extension is mostly provided by the government. However, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture does not have the manpower needed to ensure that its network of agricultural extension workers reaches every farmer. Some smallholder farmers, therefore, have never interacted with an extension agent or received extension support of any kind.

Local production of food crops is predominantly carried out by smallholder farmers who rely on rainfed production, a limited use of inputs, low mechanisation, and inadequate post-harvest facilities. These are farmers who own small plots of land on which they grow subsistence crops, relying almost exclusively on family labour. For these farmers, increased productivity depends on an improved access to proven, affordable technologies and practices, and on their willingness and ability to adopt them. If smallholder farmers are to increase their productivity and profitability, they need to adopt yield-enhancing technologies and practices such as farm inputs and planting a maize crop in rows.

A communications tool

Radio is a great communication tool for African farmers as most have access to it. Radio can provide important and timely information in a farmer's own language, and radio (often coupled with mobile

phones), can give farmers a powerful voice. But radio is not always effective. Farmer programmes often do not provide quality, interactive content and the voices of farmers are rarely heard. 'Experts', on the other hand, are featured and respected, whether they are helpful or not. Programme hosts can often be disdainful of farmers and important issues are ignored or avoided because they are complex, sensitive, or require additional resources. Broadcasters often receive no training, and are expected to produce effective programmes with little or no guidance or support. And most agricultural broadcasting is very boring to listen to!

Too frequently, radio stations think that a farmer programme is a slot in the schedule into which they can simply 'dump' agricultural information and hope that farmers will listen and use it. But a radio programme is a *distinct* communication tool, with its own strengths and weaknesses, like a novel, a comic strip, or a song. An effective farm radio programme follows *standards* that exploit the strengths of radio.

Farm Radio International, with funding from USAID (September 2014 to January 2017) and the Canadian-funded International Development Research Centre's International Food Security Research Fund (November 2015 to February 2018), is leveraging the use of community radio programming to harness the impact of radio extension on the farming businesses of

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smallholders, and to make the production of such radio programmes financially sustainable. This easy approach targets the suppliers of radio extension to make radio programmes more participatory and engaging for the smallholder farmers who desperately need tailored information in a timely fashion.

The FRI approach

Farm Radio International began by working with community radio station hosts to conduct exploratory research to understand the key characteristics of the farmers whose behaviour the project team sought to change, as well as to understand the environment in which farmers live, work, and make decisions. The aim was to understand the everyday experiences of smallholder farmers. The needs, goals, fears, values, behaviours, and interests of smallholder farmers were gained through observation and face-to-face

conversations with them. Participants were also asked to share an experience or story, focusing on their farming activities in a typical day and use of technologies, to feed into the exploratory research. Farmers were also asked about which types of media they listened to during different parts of the day, and whether they interacted with any of them.

The exploratory research provided a solid understanding of the opportunities to reduce the barriers farmers face in adopting new technologies. Farm Radio International then used the research to train farm broadcasters to make their programmes useful and interesting – and even empowering – and ensure the programmes would have a wide audience of both women and men farmers. To facilitate this training of broadcasters, Farm Radio International pulled together ‘best practices’ of farm broadcasters, and grouped them in a way that would be easy to remember and use (see Box).

VOICE standards for effective farmer radio programming

V – The programme values small-scale farmers, both women and men. It respects farmers for their hard work producing nutritious food for their families and markets, often in the face of major challenges. It reaches out to farmers to understand their situation, and is dedicated to supporting them in their

farming work and in their efforts to improve rural life.

O – The programme provides farmers with the opportunity to speak and be heard on all matters. It encourages small-scale farmers to name their concerns, discuss them, and organise to act on them. It holds to account those with a duty to hear farmers and serve their needs.

I – The programme provides farmers with the information they need, when they need

it. Farmers require specific information and they need it in time to act on it.

C – The programme is consistent and convenient. It is broadcast at least weekly, at a time when women and men farmers can listen.

E – The programme is entertaining and memorable. It appeals to the interests and tastes of a wide range of local farmers. Complicated material is presented in a way that helps farmers remember it.



Importance of rural radio

Three maize farmers in an isolated community of Nsokonee Dentekrom have made significant improvements to their farms and livelihoods since beginning to listen to the AgroTech radio programme. Jenet Owusua, Susanna Nyarko, and Saah Olivia are leaders in their community.

Owusua, who has 20 years of farming experience, used to plant ‘all over the place’ by broadcasting her maize seed, but says that after listening to the programme she

has changed and structured some of her previous practices. For example, she now plants in rows, which has affected the farm positively.

“We haven’t done the harvesting yet,” Owusua said, “but we are anticipating a much higher yield than in previous years. It’s going to help us with our expenses, especially when it comes to paying school fees and hospital bills. This year’s yield will go a long way.” She is expecting to yield 3–4 times more than normal. “Sometimes when we go to the farms, we don’t want to come back to the house as we’re seeing the maize grow beautifully in rows,” Owusua

explained. “We’re just so happy, we like to stay and watch our plants. It’s fulfilling.”

Nyarko, who has 25 years of farming experience, now knows the importance of the way she plants and applies the good agronomic practices she learned from the radio programme, and Olivia says she can now better manage her field. “I would like to highlight especially the lessons on fertiliser application. Before the programme, I would farm a very big piece of land without but it was no use; but now I just feel very happy. All three of us do,” she added.

Above Saah Olivia (32), Susuana Nyarko (56), and Jenet Owusua (41) from the Nsokonee Dentekrom community near Techiman, Ghana

A next step has been the formation of community listener groups. According to farmers, they learn better in groups and like hearing the opinions of others, so they were encouraged to form groups within their communities to enable them listen to content aired over the radio. Farm Radio International trained community members to run discussion sessions with these groups after listening and interact with the programme.

The listening groups allowed for the exchange of differing ideas in the uptake of new ideas. A trusted community member (an agricultural field advisor or a community leader), rather than an outsider or an official, served as a trusted source of information. This encouraged the adoption of ideas that were aired on local community radio programmes. The use of Community Information Centres to remind farming communities by announcing the days and time for airing the radio programmes also proved effective and increased listenership.

What was achieved?

Listenership data from radio broadcasters revealed that on 24 October 2016, Adars FM had over 61,000 unique listeners, and the highest listener figures for its repeat show occurred on 10 July 2016, with 77,000 unique listeners tuning in. On 16 November 2016, Radio Bar had 73,000 listeners. Across all of the radio stations Farm Radio International recruited, 486,390 individuals were reached and 22.1% adopted new agronomic practices. Although likely to be an underestimate, Farm Radio has calculated that an additional 535,000 hectares is being cultivated with improved agronomic technologies.

A listener survey in November 2016, focusing on which technologies farmers had adopted, revealed that those who had listened to interactive radio programmes that promoted row planting were more likely to practice this planting method (79.5%) than non-listeners (73%). Listeners were also more likely to

Boosting yields with radio broadcasts

Adjoa Kuma, a maize farmer from Baniantwe, near Kintampo, has been farming her 1.2 ha farm for the past 5 years with limited success – until she started listening to the AgroTech radio programme on Radio BAR and Adars.

“I have not harvested yet, but it is clear I will get many more bags of maize and more money to put towards my family and health with this year’s yield,” Kuma said.

She explains that the teachings she has heard on the radio programmes are better than the old methods she was using.

Initially, for example, she planted maize but now she is planting her maize in rows and is applying fertiliser, and building on lessons she learned about agrochemical usage.

“My maize is now growing very well and is much bigger than in previous years. It’s much better than in the years before. I’m able to sell, and I will use it in taking care of my children,” Kuma adds.

Her advice to other farmers is to listen to the AgroTech radio programme, promising that if they apply everything they learn on the programme, they will be able to improve their farming.



Mrs Adjoa Kuma

weed their maize fields (85%) than non-listeners (76%) and use tarpaulins to dry their maize (84% listeners, 56% non-listeners). The survey revealed that compared to non-listeners (47%), listeners were also more likely (67%) to use a type of three-layered hermetically sealed storage bag (PICS Bags) to store their seeds.

On the other hand, when radio broadcasters used the VOICE standards approach to improve farmer radio programming, this led to increased listenership and increased advertising sponsorship and revenue from agro-input dealers. As a result, broadcasters and production teams have cultivated a revenue stream from advertising to sustainably produce radio programmes. Research also revealed a significant willingness to pay among diverse groups of stakeholders, including listeners. One option – Farm Radio+ – would charge a small membership fee and give listeners access to a ‘premium’ service that included agricultural tips sent to mobile phones, market information on demand, on air ‘shout-outs’, and guaranteed access for farmers groups to an AgroTech extension agent via phone.

Many encouraging signs

Maize farmers have used the radio as a valuable source of information. The use of PICS bags was significantly different between listeners and non-listeners. Listeners were also more likely to plant their maize in rows, weed their maize fields, and dry their maize on tarpaulins than non-listeners. Overall, there are some encouraging signs that the interactive radio programming has had a pronounced effect on the uptake of improved technologies among listeners of radio stations.



Alfred Yeboah works as Program Manager at the Grameen Foundation, Ghana.
E-mail: ayeboah@grameenfoundation.org



Based in Accra, **Rosemond Ohene** works as Project Coordinator for Farm Radio International.
E-mail: rohene@farmradiogh.org