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# Pack 96, Item 5

Type: Broadcaster info doc

May 2013

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# How to get farmers talking about important things (Facilitating farmer voice)

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### Notes to broadcaster

Small-scale farmers are rarely comfortable talking on radio. They think that radio broadcasters and experts should do the talking while they, the farmers, do the farming.

But the improvement of small-scale farming needs farmers themselves actively speaking about things that are important to them. Farmers need to describe, discuss, debate, propose, criticize, support, celebrate – all with their own voices.

And when some farmers speak, more farmers will hear them, and will become emboldened to speak for themselves.

*One of your most important tasks is to help farmers speak on matters of importance to them. We call that "facilitating farmer voice." Here's how.*

Do you want to facilitate farmers' voices? First of all, *check your own attitude about small-scale farmers*. If you think of small-scale farmers as lazy and uneducated and therefore ignorant people who can't or won't improve their farming, then hand the mic over to someone else!

However, if you see small-scale farmers as important citizens who need to have a voice in development, then you are probably right for the job of being a farm broadcaster. How important are farmers? Well, small-scale farmers invented plant breeding. This led to astronomy, calendars, and science. Without farmers there would be no science, no cities, and no civilization as we know it today.

Here is how the "V" in our VOICE standards describes the attitude of effective farmer programs:

V – The programs *value* smallholder farmers, both women and men. They respect farmers for their hard work producing food for their families and the markets, often in the face of major challenges. They reach out to farmers to understand their situation, and are dedicated to supporting them in their farming work and in their efforts to improve rural life.

Also, *check your attitude about yourself*. If you think of yourself as *better* than farmers, or if you see yourself as someone who can fix farming, if only the farmers would pay attention, then farm broadcasting might not be the best assignment for you. However, if you see yourself as a person who has the desire and skills to *serve* farmers, you can become a good facilitator of farmer voice.

What does it mean to facilitate farmer voice? First of all, think of how *you* deal with an issue of importance to you. You clarify the issue, you seek advice from respected friends, you decide what to do. You act. Now think of small-scale farmers. How can you help them clarify the issue, get good advice and decide what to do? That is facilitation. To facilitate means to "make something easy." To be a facilitator is to make it easy for farmers to speak, to discuss, to decide, and to consider acting on issues of importance to them.

Once you know that you have the right *attitude* to be a facilitator, consider following these six steps:

1) Get farmers talking about things that are important to them?

2) Bring focus to the real issue, and give it a name.

3) Facilitate the discussion with farmers who are comfortable on radio.

4) Encourage other farmers to speak with clarity and confidence.

5) Help farmers resolve the issue.

6) Provide feedback.

**Step 1) Get farmers talking about important things**

The easiest way to start talking with farmers is to chat with them about the easy topics: family, children, sports, cooking, the harvest, or the weather. This easy chat will help farmers feel comfortable, and get them talking. Often, too, farmers will learn to trust broadcasters through the sharing of common experiences. However, don't stop there! Use the comfortable bond you have built between you and the farmers to get them talking about things that really matter to them and their families. Ask questions such as "Are families in your area well-fed this year?" This might prompt a farmer to reply "No, the maize only lasted for eight months, not twelve, as it used to." Now you have the beginning of an issue of importance!

**Step 2) Bring focus to the core issue**

Then you need to help farmers clarify the basic issue. Take the example above: Are animals eating the standing maize? Are insects boring into the ripening heads? Are thieves stealing it from the fields? Are weevils attacking it in granaries? Or are there just fewer, smaller cobs because the maize has used essential nutrients in the soil and they have not been replaced?

Talk to more farmers, and to agricultural experts, to identify one or more underlying issues. Let's assume that it turns out that it is not the animals, insects, vandals, or weevils. It is the weakened quality of the soil. Settle on a name for this – a clear simple, descriptive name that will help focus farmer discussion. For example, "depleted soil" might be a clear name, and one that suggests improvement is possible, whereas "bad soil" might lead farmers to think the problem is unfixable. And with the help of wise farmers and agricultural experts, get the research you need about the causes of soil depletion and the possible remedies for it.

**Step 3) Facilitate discussion with farmers who are comfortable on radio**

Now that you have identified an issue, assemble a group of farmers to start the discussion.

Your task in this discussion is to get farmers talking about all sides of this core issue from their perspectives. What is the impact on their family nutrition? Who in their area has done something to improve the situation? Has the government extension agent been able to help? What is holding farmers back from making improvements to their soil?

Over time, you might want to select a regular panel of farmers to discuss the big issues. Panel members would be chosen for their:

- clarity of speech

- ability to converse on a range of issues

- availability to attend the recording sessions on a regular basis

- sense of humour

- ability to hold their own in discussions and get their perspectives across

*Caution! Make sure your panel includes farmers whose circumstances are similar to the circumstances of the farmers in your audience. Don't just rely on model farmers who have lots of resources and who like to talk about everything, but whose situation is not typical of the small-scale farmers in your audience.*

One way to assemble your panel is to use phone-ins as an audition. While listening to the various callers, measure them against the qualities you want in a panel member.

**Step 4) Encourage a wider group of farmers to speak with clarity and confidence**

Your next challenge is a big one – facilitating the voices of those farmers who are not used to speaking on radio. The secret to getting these farmers talking is to give them lots of encouragement. Encouragement takes many forms:

- It starts with you. Convey the attitude that you believe they are important people who need to be heard.

- Express a sense of hope, the hope that by adding their voice, there is a better chance that the issue can be resolved.

- Interview farmers in a group in their own surroundings, or hold a panel discussion with them in the studio. If you can get one member of the group started talking, then you can prompt another member to react to the first farmer's comment, or add his or her own opinion. This might provide the momentum to get others to open up and talk. Meanwhile you, as facilitator, can encourage the quiet members to talk – they might have the most insightful comments of all! Your farmers will find “strength in numbers.”

Since these farmers are not used to talking on radio, they might not know what words and phrases will work best. Listen carefully to what they say and help them choose words that will best communicate their thoughts to your farmer audience. For example, if a farmer talks about a “bad garden,” ask her or him questions to find out what is meant. Is the garden overrun with weeds, or does it not get any water, or are the nutrients in the soil depleted? Then, in your next question to that farmer, use the term that most clearly describes the problem in the garden.

Women farmers in particular often find it hard to speak out. But women may talk more freely in women’s groups than men do in men’s groups. And radio can help empower women. This is very important since women do much of the farming work in Africa!

*Caution! In some cultures, women are threatened if they speak out. Since you cannot provide protection for these women, do not encourage them to put themselves at risk. However, you can still help them share their comments:*

*- Broadcast the voices of women who can speak safely.*

*- Gather and broadcast women’s voices from other places, other cultures.*

*- Interview the women and then disguise their voices so they cannot be identified.*

*- Interview the women and report their comments without identifying them.*

**Step 5) Help farmers resolve the issue**

Your next facilitation task is to help farmers *resolve* the issue, one way or another. They might want to:

- do further study and discussion

- take some kind of action: e.g.,

- ask the local farmers' association to deal with the issue

- ask the extension department to promote intercropping legumes with maize

- organize to purchase fertilizer

- or they might simply want to put the issue aside for now, especially if it has generated no momentum, or if there is a more pressing issue to deal with.

Enrich this discussion with information you gather in your research. What do wise farmers and agriculture experts say are the options to improve depleted soil? How have farmers in other places with a similar climate improved their soils? Are there government and/or NGO supports for activities to improve soil? Gather this information/research and feed in into your farmer discussions and ask farmers to reflect and consider what could be done in your area. Use your facilitation skills to help your farmer discussion group come to some sort of decision on this issue.

**Step 6) Provide feedback**

Having a *voice* is not very satisfactory if the voice is not listened to. Your final task as a facilitator is to get the farmers' voices out to the wider community, to build support, and to get the farmers' message to people in positions of authority, who might support or oppose farmers' interests. In this example, phone out to a responsible official in the Ministry of Agriculture, raise the issue and have that official speak to your panel of farmers, and then encourage your farmers to react to what the official says.

If the facilitation of farmers' voice leads to any kind of success, then help the farmers celebrate that success on air. If the extension department starts to help farmers enrich their soil by promoting the intercropping of beans with maize, then tell the farmers that their voices prompted the initiative. If the government makes it easier for farmers to get fertilizer, celebrate that success and give credit to the farmers who pushed the issue.

And if the farmers' voices fall on deaf ears, have them speak about that too. Talk about how much clearer the issue is now. Talk of how many more farmers understand the real issue now. Talk about how you might not always succeed, but that you don't get anywhere if you don't name the issue and play the game.

In both cases, help your farmers understand that by adding their voice to the issue, they have taken an important step in the continuing work of improving rural life in their area.

**In conclusion**

Your main contributions to getting farmers to talk, to facilitating farmer voice can be summarized in a few phrases: *showing respect, taking farmers seriously, clarifying issues, encouraging thoughtful comments, encouraging farmers to speak out, celebrating results*.

If you can do this, program after program, you will build strong loyalty from the farmers in your area. This loyalty will be important for the reputation of your whole radio station. Everyone wins when farmer-listeners know that your station is the voice of the farmer.

## Acknowledgements

Contributed by: Doug Ward, Chair of the Board of Directors, Farm Radio International

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 Project undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)