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# How to establish and manage successful radio listening groups

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***Editor’s note:*** *This broadcaster-how-to document presents a tried and true method of establishing and managing radio listening groups, based on many years of experience in Zambia. It is meant as a guide to forming and maintaining radio listening groups rather than a strict “blueprint” to follow, regardless of the situation. The basic principles of establishing and managing radio listening groups are well-established and do not vary greatly. But in certain cases, other approaches may work equally effectively. In a few places in the document, we have noted alternative approaches.*

**Introduction**

Rural communities, and especially small-scale farmers, have a lot of respect for the radio as a reliable and important source of information for improving their livelihoods. Farmers always make an effort to listen to the radio. Some even take their radio sets with them to the field.

But the impact of radio can be enhanced when people with similar interests – for example, farming, health or politics – listen to the radio in groups. This is because, afterwards, people can discuss what they have heard, share experiences and even plan what actions they should take.

A farmer radio program helps bring small-scale farmers together and motivates them to try new ways of farming. For the producer of a farmer program, it is encouraging to know that his or her program is being listened to by its intended target audience.

For these reasons, helping small-scale farmers listen to their favourite farmer program in a group is one of the most important tasks for a farmer program producer. *(Editor’s note: In this broadcaster how-to document, it is assumed that the producer will interact with listening groups. But other radio staff can fill this role.)* The following pages explain how this can be best done.

**Disadvantages of traditional radio listening**

Listening to an effective farmer program individually is wonderful. But, compared to listening in a group, it has several limitations. One of the biggest is that, because listening is informal, it is not usually regular; the listener does not have peer support, and cannot rely on the group to recap and discuss the contents after the program.

Unless the program has effective ways for listeners to interact on-air with the host and guests, listeners cannot easily get clarification on issues that may be vague. Nor can the listener create an action plan or interact and build a relationship with the producer. As a result, most of the information in the program is not fully retained and used.

**Advantages of listening to the radio in groups**

Farmer listening groups make it possible for farmers with common interests to come together and share experiences. Farmers can discuss the program content and gain better understanding. They can also encourage and support each other to adopt new and better farming practices that are presented on the program.

The farmer program becomes a “magnet” that brings the group members together regularly. Together, they can attempt to find answers to their production, processing and marketing challenges and better position themselves in the agricultural value chain. They can interact with the producer more effectively as a group and become active participants in designing the farmer program and selecting topics that are relevant to them.

The advantage for the producer is that he or she can become more intimate with the target audience and more focussed on its exact information needs. The producer can easily make follow-up visits to the groups to assess the impact of the program and make necessary adjustments.

**Organizing farmer radio listening groups**

Forming listening groups should always be a mutual venture between a producer and his or her target audience. Before joining a listening group, it’s best if farmers appreciate the advantages of listening in groups, are ready to make adjustments to their working schedules, and are ready to participate in all group activities.

*Assessment:*The first step, even before starting a farmer program, is to assess the need for a program. Listeners in rural communities expect a regularly produced and presented farmer program. Producers should never decide on the format and content of the program, but always try to discover which issues are important to the audience.

Thus, a producer should conduct audience research at the beginning. The purpose of this research is to determine the listening habits of the target audience and the audience’s access to other sources of information, the radio, cell phones, television and even the Internet. It is also valuable to collect information on: distance from towns, quality of roads, access to phones, contact with extension services, exposure to development activities, and educational levels.

*The baseline survey:* This survey can be quite simple. There are a variety of existing resources, for example the SADC Handbook for Participatory Rural Communication Appraisal, which contain tools that can be used.

The producer can begin the survey by conducting a focused phone-in discussion on a few central topics. Based on the response to the phone-in, the producer can prepare a more elaborate questionnaire to use in the field for conducting one-to-one and group interviews with the target groups.

The survey should tell the producer what type of programs the target audience wants to listen to, and on what days and at what times the majority prefer the program to be aired. It is also important to determine the audience’s readiness to listen in groups, the availability of radio sets, and the most obvious challenges to the success of listening groups. A study of the people’s cultural, traditional and religious beliefs and productive activities will have a lot of bearing on whether group listening will work for a community.

At the end of the survey, the producer will be able to gauge the people’s willingness to actively participate in forming and operating listening groups. This includes their readiness to meet in a chosen place whenever the program is aired and to participate in group activities. The producer will also understand the reach of the station and thus how many groups to establish.

**Forming groups:** It is best to start with a few pilot groups in key locations of the radio station’s broadcasting catchment. This will make it easier to manage, interact with, backstop and monitor the groups. Depending on the level of success with the pilot groups, more groups can be established later.

Forming a group should take into account several key factors. The first is that each group should include people who live near each other and share similar interests and values. Each group should have between fifteen to twenty members. Bigger groups are much more difficult to sustain. (*Editor’s note: Smaller groups of 10-15 members can be effective as well*.)

It is often easier and more effective to identify existing groups – farmer groups, Mothers’ Unions, etc. – and request that they consider adding “listening group” to their activities, rather than establish an entirely new group.

**Leadership:** Each group should select its own leadership, including a chairperson, secretary and treasurer. One additional person should be elected as an information person responsible for publicity and communications.

The producer must avoid hand-picking people for these positions, but only facilitate the process. Care must be taken to ensure gender balance.

**Site and resources:** Choosing a suitable site for the listening sessions is an important decision that must be left to the group members. A group may decide to rotate from one farmer’s place to another, or just have one meeting place.

Sometimes the group might choose to meet under a tree in the village. However, because of the weather, it is usually recommended that each group constructs a suitable shelter.

Each group must decide how to acquire a radio set. Some members might offer their own radios, especially in the beginning. The most common challenge is batteries for the radio. The group must find ways to raise money for batteries and other needs.

Sometimes a radio station can ask well-wishers to donate a radio. The most suitable radio in this case is usually a wind-up solar radio. NGOs and other organizations sometimes donate radios such as yellow Freeplay solar radios when working on local or national projects. Unfortunately, people are often careless with donated equipment, which leads to misuse, mishandling and early breakdowns.

Alternatively, the producer can encourage groups to engage in fundraising activities to buy a radio and batteries. These activities can also generate funds for the secretary’s stationery, to cater for special open days, and other needs. It is for activities such as this that a group needs a treasurer.

**Training radio listening groups**

After the groups have been formed, they must be trained how to manage and sustain themselves. If you start with a few pilot groups, the producer and radio station can conduct one-day training sessions in a central place for all group leaders.

The most important aspects of this training include developing by-laws to govern the group and procedures to be followed during each listening session. The training should emphasize:

1. members gathering at the meeting point in good time so they can share experiences as they wait for the broadcast;
2. the secretary keeping a diary or register to record:
3. attendance at each meeting,
4. matters arising, and
5. resolutions.

\*The radio station could design one uniform register for this to be used by all groups. This is a very important tool for monitoring and evaluation.

It is a good idea for someone to be designated as the group’s facilitator or mediator. This person helps promote discussion after a broadcast and organizes the delivery of group feedback to the station. The facilitator could be someone within the group, or an external person such as an extension worker. Mobile phones, a designated “Hotline’ at the station and other ICTs can be used to deliver feedback to the station.

**Support for radio listening groups**

To operate successfully, listening groups need support from the radio station. This can include helping the groups find suitable radio sets and providing special stationery for feedback and evaluation. If it becomes clear that a listening group needs help with some aspect of its operations, the station can conduct trainings to ensure that groups are operating successfully.

But the most important way that stations can support listening groups is for the producer to be responsive to their need for information. The producer must be attentive to what the listening groups want and design programs that meet those needs. One way for achieving this is to conduct regular field recordings of farmers’ voices. This should be done on location because farmers tend to communicate more clearly and effectively in their own environment than in the studio. Farmers’ voices should occupy a big chunk of the farmer program. Alternative ways of finding out what farmers need include simply travelling to the field and talking to farmers, listening to their discussions, and asking questions about what they need and want to hear on the radio.

On the other hand, as the producer interacts with the groups, he or she must identify their information needs and liaise with sources of information and feature “experts” on the farmer program, including extension agents, agricultural researchers, NGO staff, and, importantly, farmers themselves. These experts can provide answers or clarification of issues that affect farmers, for example, a new technology, the weather, climate change, the market, etc. But air-time for such experts should be kept to a minimum and governed by necessity, and never overtake the farmers’ voices.

**Self-support initiatives for radio listening groups**

If listening groups use ordinary radio sets, their biggest challenge is getting batteries. Also, radios, including donated ones, can break down and need repair. Funds are also required for the secretary’s stationery and for public notice postings of events.

It is not always possible for a radio station to meet these financial requirements. Consequently, the groups must know how – or be trained how – to conduct fundraising activities to support their needs. They might establish a communal field, garden or livestock unit and use the profit from selling the products to support their needs. Alternatively, members can hire out their labour, e.g., to cultivate or harvest a farmer’s field for a fee.

**Feedback**

It is important for a producer to get regular feedback from the field. This will help him or her to adjust the format and content of the farmer program to make it more responsive to the listener. Feedback will also show if the farmers are listening actively in groups or not.

The easiest way to manage this is for the producer to air the station’s contact information on every program, particularly phone numbers. Because a producer’s time and phone budget are limited and because phone lines can easily become clogged, it is best to encourage listeners to send questions or comments by text messaging. There should be a logsheet for all incoming communication, and the producer should acknowledge and respond to all queries from the listener by phone or on the next program.

A more formal arrangement is for radio stations to design a special feedback form that captures the following information:

1. name of the listening group and location,
2. number of members in total,
3. members attending each listening session,
4. listeners’ comments after hearing the program,
5. important points arising from subsequent discussion, and
6. resolutions and action plans made by the group.

The feedback forms should be completed in duplicate and the originals sent to the radio station at the end of every month. These forms will provide a lot of vital information on what farmers need from the farmer program, and help the producer adjust the program accordingly.

**Monitoring and evaluation**

The producer should keep in touch with all the groups. This can be done through phone-ins, diligent management of feedback forms, and regular field visits, especially when recording farmers’ voices.

However, from time to time, it is necessary to invite an independent person to conduct an impartial evaluation of the impact of the listening groups. Fortunately, many organizations and educational facilities are available to support such initiatives.

**Conclusion**

Radio listening groups have proved to be a very effective way of reaching rural communities, including those which are marginalized and underserved. The system has worked very well for the Ministry of Agriculture in Zambia since it was first introduced by George Atkins, the founder of FRI, in 1967.

Radio listening groups can be useful for producers of all community-focused programs on farming, health and sanitation, and even good governance!

## Acknowledgements

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*Filius Jere pioneered radio listening groups for the National Agricultural Information Services (Zambian Ministry of Agriculture) after training with George Atkins, the founder of FRI, in 1972. He currently manages 992 farmer radio listening groups for COMACO and produces two weekly farmer programs on Breeze FM in Chipata, Zambia. The groups’ motto is Listen, Discuss and Act.*

Reviewed by: Karen Hampson, Senior Program Officer, Impact Programs and Farm Radio Weekly, Farm Radio International, and Freyhiwot Nadew, Ethiopia Country Representative, Farm Radio International.

**Information sources**

Participatory Rural Communication Appraisal: Starting with the People: A Handbook. Prepared by Chike Anyaegbunam, Paolo Mefalopulos and Titus Moetsabi for the SADC Centre of Communication for Development, SDRE@fao.org. Available online at: ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/008/y5793e/y5793e00.pdf

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