



Windup radio in Madagascar Bringing information to local communities

In southern Madagascar, radio is being used in an innovative way to respond to local information needs. Working in partnership with local villagers, NGOs and in collaboration with community FM stations, the Andrew Lees Trust uses a participatory community approach to produce radio programmes that provide an important educational and information resource in an area where there is precious little of either. The project, which is partly funded by the EC, aims to help improve the self-reliance of local populations in southern Madagascar, to develop food security and teach them about resource management.

Ruth Evans reports...

Memene is a busy mother of nine children who also runs a small shop selling basic provisions in the village of Ifotaka.

Amongst Memene's prized possessions – prominently displayed on the shop counter – is a windup Freeplay radio that she recently received from The Andrew Lees Trust, a local NGO working with other local partners, such as WWF, to improve people's education and information in southern Madagascar.

"The WWF gave us the radio so that we can have the information we need about protecting the forest," she says. "The programmes help us to know about the threats to the forest. We shouldn't cut down the trees because it jeopardises the life of lemurs. We also listen to news on the radio."

The radio programmes are made by the Andrew Lees Trust, a local NGO that was set up a few years ago in memory of a British conservationist who died in the forest. Yvonne Orenge, the project's director, says that most village commu-

nities in southern Madagascar are so poor that they can't afford the batteries for radios and have little technology beyond a hoe. They had no access to radio or information so were delighted when they were given the windup radios.

Sometimes, however, it was hard for villagers to understand how the radios worked, says Yvonne. "Some were suspicious and wanted to know how does this radio work? Is there a cockroach inside?"

The project has now been going on for two years and the villagers of Ifotaka are used to the radios and the educational programmes the trust produces.

Need for information

It's hard to emphasise how deprived of information they were before the radio arrived. The children hardly go to school and there's no electricity, and certainly no TV or newspapers.

The programmes are made in the local languages of Antandroy and Antanosy, and aim to be as relevant as possible to local concerns and to offer solutions to people's problems. There's a direct input and feedback from village level to the programme-makers and programmes have been about management of cattle disease, raising and selling livestock, farming practices, food storage, health and family welfare.

The production team is totally Malagasy apart from Yvonne, so they understand local cultural nuances. "But I wouldn't pretend there are no problems," says Yvonne. "We are working with people who are not trained journalists. They are field workers who have had some training in radio production. We concentrate on simple messages contained in simple formats."

The project has set up a small studio where the programmes can be made with local input and use the existing community FM network in the region. Yvonne estimates that programmes can reach between 40-60,000 people, depending on the areas and subjects being targeted at any given time.

Distributing free radios in the villages isn't always as straightforward as it sounds and many issues have had to be addressed along the way. "One of the first things we discovered when we started the work was that everyone wanted a radio for themselves," says Yvonne. "They didn't want to share. We have tried to set up listening groups but this can also be quite problematic due to the hierarchies and male dominance in villages." Addressing these issues requires patience and sensitivity to the way things are done in the region, and are often not understood by donors who are sometimes impatient for faster results.

Working with local partners

The Andrew Lees Trust works with and through several local partners, such as WWF and WFP, because they don't want to send out information into a void where there are no services or back-up to respond to listener's questions. Yvonne cites as an example the locust infestation that plagued the area a couple of years ago. This was a new problem for a lot of the people, so although chemical products were available to spray the locusts, people didn't know where to get them or how to use them. The radio programmes gave them the information that they needed. Similarly, when Rotary International introduced a polio vaccination scheme in the area, 92 percent of women interviewed by the Trust said they had taken their children to be vaccinated after they had heard the radio campaigns.

In particular, the broadcasts encourage people to take more active control over their resource management and to look after the unique forest in which they live.

Local stoves use less firewood

The Trust also runs a sister project that teaches women to build fuel-efficient stoves from local clay. "Where women used ten sticks of wood before, they now use only two," says Yvonne. "So these stoves have greatly reduced fuel wood consumption. It has also drastically reduced the time women spend collecting fuel and frees them up to do other things."

Memene is one of the women who took up the idea of the stove two months ago with great enthusiasm. Just outside her small, wooden house, there's a clay stove and in no time at all Memene cooks a delicious meal of chicken and rice on it.

"The first time I heard about the stove I was really happy because it doesn't use much firewood and it's quick to cook, rice and meat... I really like it." Now she says, she has more time to concentrate on other things such as running a small shop. Other people have more time to work in their rice fields.

The project has built about 2,500 stoves so far and now the women are enthusiastically sharing the technology with each other and training others. They are given an incentive – a one-off handout of WFP food to compensate them for the time they spend building the stoves. But once they start using them, says Memene, the benefits are obvious: "Having the radio and the stove help us to understand the problem because we get information from the radio... the radio teaches us everything about the environment." ■

