

Chapter 16

After 50 years: The role and use of rural radio in Africa

Jean-Pierre Ilboudo

To consider today of the role and use of rural radio raises the question of its place in the new African media landscape, and in particular in the radio environment marked by deregulation and the end of broadcast monopolies. Given the pluralist nature of the contemporary broadcasting environment, what role can rural radio play to support the emerging civil society? What does the future hold for rural radio, indeed for public radio, in Africa, in view of the ever-increasing number of local stations, be they commercial or community?



This new issue is a major challenge for us all. To understand the contemporary challenges, it is useful to take a historical perspective; to analyse the changes in the role and use of rural radio that have occurred over the last fifty years.

It would be a truism to say that rural radio has known various forms and objectives. The speed at which its roles and uses are evolving stems from the fact that it cannot be seen as an educational technology independent of the social system or untouched by integrationist policies designed to keep the prevailing leadership in power.

In what has by and large been a rapid process, African States, that is to say the governments which take the decisions affecting radio, have become aware of how most broadcasts meet the tastes and needs of citizens. As a result, it has been necessary to revisit the nature of rural broadcasting, and from this the concept of rural radio has emerged.

How has this evolution taken place? In short, that depends on the countries concerned, for each one has known different rhythms of change.

Let us now consider what have been the fundamental steps in this development, whether successive or simultaneous.

From Farm Radio to Radio Forums or Radio Clubs

Even prior to independence, there were radio broadcasts which aimed to give the community advice on hygiene, health and practical finance, mainly for farmers. This meant that the new countries in sub-Saharan Africa very soon used radio as a means to promote economic development – this was the case in Cameroon from 1956 onwards, Mali in 1957, or in English-speaking Africa, mainly in Nigeria. In Ghana, from the eve of independence, in 1956, Radio Accra broadcast in Ghanaian languages and had programmes for rural communities; the weekly programme ‘The Cocoa Family’ about life on cocoa plantations is an example. In 1957, Radio Ghana started talk shows on agriculture, albeit in English.

In Benin, as early as 1960, Radio Dahomey had a special programme in the Fon language; it is at this time that the government of Dahomey requested the FAO to design a rural radio broadcasting service. It worked together with the agricultural department based in Porto-Novo and effectively started operations in 1967. It broadcast in six languages, covering palm planting, layout of maize fields and the introduction of rice and cotton farming.

In Niger, the Association of Radio Clubs was set up in 1962, with its first broadcasts in 1965, following the line of farm radio. The major topics covered were improved seed varieties, soil management, fertilisers and cattle rearing; it also dealt with such issues as the marketing of food stuffs, irrigation, water hygiene, women in the household, the National Assembly, and animal husbandry.

In Nigeria, it was at Radio Kaduna that a programme encouraged farmers to adopt agricultural mechanisation and improved seed varieties. And in Kenya, from 1962, the *Education by radio* programme broadcast advice for farmers.

In the so-called English-speaking countries of Africa, this sort of radio was widespread. Often programmes were produced by the Ministry of Agriculture, with its own radio production units.

In Cameroon, beginning in 1966, there were broadcasts of agricultural advice in the Fulfuldé and Fulani languages, and in Hausa on regional stations. In Ivory Coast, the programme *La coupe nationale du progrès*, or The National Progress Bowl, was started in 1966 with a mixture of extension-style agricultural information, traditional music and contests between sub-prefectures, all with the goal of improving agricultural output and social conditions.

There are many examples of this early orientation in the use of radio for development. Such was the case with *Radio Progrès* in Benin in the years 1968–1969, and with the development radio contests on the rural radio of the Burkina Faso in 1975. It is important to emphasise that radio club approach was adopted in other countries: Ghana (1956), Niger (1962), Benin (1967-68), Burkina Faso (1969) and Togo (1970). Later, in a second phase, it was no longer a question of developing awareness of these issues within the stations themselves, but of using radio to support agricultural policies and, in a more general way, rural policies.

Farm radio, with or without the support of radio clubs and their collective listening approach, had been seen as a supplement to agricultural extension work, and even as a palliative for the shortcomings of training services. The purpose of a broadcast was to give the farming community short and to-the-point information segments, sometimes known as micro-programmes, with which to improve their agricultural output. Farm radio was seen as a radio school, serving to consolidate the process of organising emerging cooperative groups.

With the introduction of listening clubs, farm radio was quickly transformed. This second phase saw a strategy of radio forums and radio debates, where listening, discussing and decision-making were brought together, following the example of Niger's radio clubs:

- Look at observable facts (or build a foundation of facts through a process of enumeration, description, comparison, distinction, classification and definition);
- Generate ideas (develop understanding, look for the consequences, rules and theories);
- Plan actions whilst determining goals, means and methods.

What lessons can be learned from these first and second phases, which in practice almost merged one into the other?

By amplifying extension services and programmes, the impact of rural radio broadcasts led to a notable increase in cash crop production in most African countries in the 1970s. It must be noted, however, that rural radio erred towards a reductionist approach to development, reducing development to a simple increase in agricultural productivity, and choosing to focus its messages on rural problems rather than on concepts of under-development. It can also be noted that the issue of socio-economic change was not grasped by many, and that political action – mobilising rural communities – was avoided. Consequently,

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this educational work was carried out in isolation, without collaboration with other efforts to improve rural livelihoods.

With regard to radio clubs, it is hard to say which changes, in the long-term, were due to them or to other influences at work in the community. It is also hard to determine their costs of radio debates: staff (local facilitators in each club), equipment (714 radio sets distributed in Benin in 1973 and 580 in Burkina Faso in 1980), printing and distributing listenership reports, and so on. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to four major sets of constraints:

- The lack of networks linking extension workers and programme hosts. Contact between the two opposite ends of the chain was only through written reports;
- The production centre was also isolated from the listening groups, and could not benefit from their feedback to improve the programmes;
- There was a lack of coordination between rural radio programmes and projects run by other ministries or NGOs;
- Listening clubs were often set up without prior identification of community needs, or without having involved those primarily concerned. After an initial period of fascination, people switched to a phase of criticism, and finally saturation.

From the Classic Model of Rural or Educational Radio, to Local, Community-Based, Rural Radio

One thing is clear: radio campaigns and propaganda pushed by the top echelons from capital cities rarely achieved the desired effect. Was there then a change in the intentions of rural radio? Did the experience of radio clubs usher in a third phase?

Rural radio ceased to be handled as just another programming unit, producing agricultural programmes just as other units were producing programmes for young people or programmes with technical information. Instead, it became an autonomous body within the national radio broadcasting system.

In Senegal, in 1968 we saw the establishment of rural educational radio (although the idea dated back to 1965). It sought to go beyond earlier experiences and was designed as an overall programme for integrated rural development. In 1969, in Burkina Faso, the same model of rural radio was launched, drawing much of its inspiration from the broadcasts of the rural division of Radio Mali. These rural and educational radio units of the 1970s stood out for their freedom of expression (as in the case of Radio Disoo in Senegal), and above all for their increased coverage of agriculture, livestock, health, news and culture.

Not only did they aim at changing farming methods, but they also sought to change people's attitudes and behaviour. In fact, such is the diversity of their phases, methods and objectives and such is the multiplicity of their styles, that we should be talking of rural radios in the plural form. The main issue facing them was that of a communication strategy. Even though they had fixed schedules, the broadcasters were not able to measure the impact their messages had on an unorganised audience. Mere letters from listeners do not provide evidence that a message, after being received, has been assimilated or has led to any concrete action. Furthermore, one has to repeat a message on the radio several times because it is fleeting in nature. Scheduling constraints also pose a problem, especially when programme directors and station managers refuse to allocate much time or the best listening slots to educational broadcasts. And there is the shortage of funds which seriously affected rural radio stations' operations, as became clear when projects supporting them came to an end.

Of course, the economic crisis which has afflicted the continent for more than two decades, devastating the economies of African countries, did not leave the world of communication unscathed. Funds from both national and external sources dried up, and this

has generally led to a crisis in African radio, particularly in the field of rural radio. Having moved ahead by leaps and bounds in the 1970s, rural radio was gradually restricted by a bureaucratic approach to production, due largely to the lack of resources permitting programme makers to travel to rural areas and to meet with farmers. Rural radio was been in danger of complete asphyxiation, and a second breath of oxygen had to be found.

To do more with less, rural communicators had to resort to imaginative financial means, drawing inspiration from the experiences of others and making use of the new possibilities offered by advances in technology. Nevertheless, they soon found themselves faced with a lack of trained competent staff, with problems of distributing their final product due to the constraints of having share their transmitters with foreign language broadcasts, with the issue of the many languages that must be used to reach target audiences, and with a class censorship which tended to block programmes which challenged the prevailing social, political, cultural and economic environment. All these led to a lack of credibility, itself engendering a breakdown in communication.

Outside, vigorous demands were being made for a new information and communication order; inside, equal passion was devoted to doing next to nothing to change things. There, the new order was driven by a handful of technical staff – so-called development facilitators – who were unwavering in their positions and much enamoured with the good tidings heard at a CIERRO-ACCT training seminar for rural broadcasters held in Ouagadougou in 1981.

The studio has been transformed into a church where only the grand organ is played, where the only message to be amplified is that of the Channel of Truth. The believer who hears this, deeply aware of that which is sacred, promises deep down to act in accordance with the sound principles of the sermon. Yet, no sooner has he left the cathedral than he takes another path, to the great astonishment of the noble preacher who was sincerely steadfast about having convinced his parish of the validity of his arguments.

The severity of this judgement betrays its somewhat excessive nature, but it does highlight the perverse character of the information flows organised by some services and bodies in rural radio; it is a one-way flow, and at the last resort, it leads to a situation of ‘*non-communication*’. Several alternative solutions were advanced, and the promotion of local rural radio in Africa is one that has been at the heart of debates among rural communication professionals since the early 1980s, discussed in various meetings organised by the Agence de coopération culturelle et technique (ACCT), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Union of National Radio and Television Organizations of Africa (URTNA) through its Inter-African Rural Radio Studies Centre in Ouagadougou (CIERRO).

At the beginning of the 1980s, these reflections led to the conclusion that there was a need to question the methods hitherto experimented with for reaching rural areas, and to search for new ways to improve communication. In 1981, from 4 to 28 October, a training seminar was held in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) for rural radio programmers, organised jointly by the ACCT and CIERRO. It was attended by fifteen participants from Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger, Togo and Tunisia. At its conclusion, the seminar report stated that “rural radio stations have done well to communicate to farmers the knowledge they needed, but they have forgotten that to learn is to express oneself and to teach oneself, especially when the true goal is for the community to assume its responsibilities.” Seminar participants agreed that local rural radio could provide a new basis for the possible renewal of communication in Africa, aiming for participatory methods linked to the problems of development.

In 1982, the community radio station of Homa Bay in the province of Nyanza in Kenya started regular broadcasts in the local language, Luo. Led by a producer of the national

broadcasting service, the Voice of Kenya (VOK), with three assistants, it had a daily one-hour broadcast of local news. Health problems and family planning topics replaced the Ki-swahili news programmes from VOK. Most programmes were based on interviews held in the market place, on farms, in schools and with organised groups such as the local women's organisation. This community radio station was part of a UNESCO project which sought to create a low-cost radio station in rural areas, where the equipment would be designed and built using local labour. The station had a low-power FM transmitter (10 watts) and with its low energy consumption, it could use solar energy. The cost of imported material totalled US\$900. The station later was later closed, due to disagreements between local people and the authorities.

In early 1983, a second CIERRO/ACCT seminar on local rural radio was held in Ouagadougou, with the goal of further developing what had been done in October 1981. The seminar discussion focused on the first seminar's report, "Towards a local rural radio".

In late 1986, a workshop-seminar on the production of messages for community media defined the underlying concept behind the variety of terms in use: local radio, community radio, free radio and participatory radio. The same workshop – hosted by UNESCO and URTNA – determined the characteristics of the content and orientation of messages to be broadcast by a rural radio station. In September 1990, a seminar-workshop was held at CIERRO with the assistance of the Swiss Romande radio and television service, on the linkages between national, regional and local radio.

Let us see what conclusions can be reached from these developments and efforts to arrive at more focused roles and functions of rural radio. The overall observation to be made is that African rural radio stations were almost all created in the 1960s, following the various preparatory meetings launched by UNESCO and FAO, and in particular following the meeting held in Giseyni in Rwanda which called for the general replication of debate-radio and radio clubs already set up in Ghana (1956) and in Niger (1962) in the Association of Radio Clubs of Niger (ARCN).

After a decade of existence, the limitations of collective listening groups as the basis for rural radio in sub-Saharan Africa were to be clearly seen. The failures of ARCN and of the radio clubs of Benin and Burkina Faso speak volumes about the dissatisfaction of farmers with these uses of radio for development. Those limitations lie principally in the fact – and here we recall what has been said earlier – that rural radio stations have done well to communicate to farmers the knowledge they needed, but they have forgotten that to learn is to express oneself and to teach oneself, especially when the true goal is for the community to assume responsibility for its own development.

The question that arises is thus not to change the educational goals of rural radio, but to allow them to attain their full meaning. This implies a reversal of the methods used previously. It is this new approach which rural radio services have been trying to achieve since the 1980s, by adopting an interactive strategy and methodology. Elements in this strategy are the public broadcasts and debates held in villages, which give rural radio stations a role of dialogue between communities. International organisations such as FAO, CIRTEF (the International Council of French-language Radio and Television Services) and CTA (Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Development – ACP-EU) should support these moves towards a broader process of democratisation on the roles and uses of public rural radio.

The vice-like grip of 'top-down'

What is at stake here is the need, today and in the future, to reinvent farmer participation in radio broadcasts, to give farmers free expression, and to arrive at a radio school of self-education where each listener can recognise their language, and better make it their own. Such

an approach in radio must get close to the field it seeks to report. The future of rural radio is in local rural radio. It becomes what the community makes of it.

The basic characteristic of this type of radio service is that it belongs to the community, and that it aims at responding to the community's needs. It has the privilege of riding the wave of democratisation of communication, which enables the broad participation of men and women of the local community, although the nature of this participation depends on the particular social context.

This is part of an alternative approach to the use of radio – one in which the radio station adapts to the socio-cultural environment. It is led by the desire to be in close proximity to local circumstances and to provide the local community with the real possibility to participate in programming, to define content and to manage the station. By making the means of communication available to a social group, this approach, and these radio stations, encourage and engender a certain degree of democratisation because it is the very nature of participation. This participation goes beyond the medium in question; it also changes the form of the radio stations. Take the example of educational rural radio: true, it broadcasts literacy programmes and provides ample advice on health, agriculture and livestock, but it also has to innovate, to create attractive forms and 'genres' of radio which carry local values and knowledge.

In conclusion, these four aspects of radio – one could almost speak of four phases – come with four distinct methods. The first lays emphasis on sensitising rural people to the radio itself. Even though radio receivers are far from being ubiquitous, this stage has long been overtaken in most countries. The second phase is to encourage people, by radio, to adopt specific agricultural practices, by informing and initiating them in new techniques. It depends more on agricultural policy than on information policy. The third phase, taking an opposite approach, lets the farmers speak and has a positive impact on agricultural policy. The fourth phase comes from the challenge of democratisation, given the propensity of the radio medium to enable the demanding goal of democracy. When this facet is well-understood and wisely used, it can confer upon local radio not the function of being a tranquilliser but that of an instrument of popular expression and education. A facet which could open up some excellent perspectives for farmers' self-improvement.

Some people have posed the legitimate question of whether local communities might not be ready to take charge of and run democratic structures in Africa. The ensuing debate has been seized by some communication specialists to express reticence about, or even opposition to, community-based local radio.

Let us be clear. Radio is a political tool for governments. To accept its decentralisation and regionalisation in the form of local community radio is to take power from the government, and to give it to local communities, which have long been excluded from the scene of public administration. For thousands of years these communities had their own democratic forms of justice and organisation, but they have been confiscated. Let these responsibilities be handed back gradually, let people again take ownership of them through the various social, political and economic organisations broadcasting on the continent, and – why not – let this happen through the use of local rural radio stations.

The experiences of Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Guinea, Congo and Ivory Coast in this process, under the leadership of the ACCT, are such that attention needs to be given to mechanisms enabling the community to assume ownership of their radio station, to issues of programme content and production, to the languages used, and to the roles assigned to specific broadcasts.

The new radio landscape

There is a direct link between the period in which private, commercial, and community radio blossomed, and the rise of political demands in Africa. Radio stations which were linked to associations or to political parties made claims for frequencies in order to gain liberty and democracy. As a result, in 1989 and 1990, in the process of drawing up their constitutions, some countries elaborated communication policies which authorised the establishment of private radio stations, regardless of the type.

And so, at the end of 1990, the first commercial private radio station was set up in Burkina Faso, under the name of Horizon FM, and another three were set up between 1992 and 1995. In Mali, it was not until the establishment of a constitutional government in 1992 that several radio stations sprung up, both in towns and rural areas. The same trend was set to grow even faster in Niger, Senegal and Cameroon where communication professionals, associations and rural communities all demanded more space for freedom of expression.

These stations were to fulfil various political, cultural and spiritual roles, depending on their background and circumstances. Some served to link the village with the Diaspora community of its emigrant sons and daughters, as in the case of the radio station in Kayes. Others have been commercial stations broadcasting primarily music and advertising.

One thing they have in common: they all broadcast programmes with information components, covering questions of health, environment, making skilful use of national languages and local music. In fact, many of them have started playing the initial roles and uses of rural radio with even a greater degree of attention in targeting specific audiences (youth, women, farmers, fishermen) or entire communities. All this raises the question of what rural radio will be like five years hence.

Civil society is getting organised, and is gradually acquiring communication tools for the simple reason that it needs to communicate. Radio is such tool because it is the cheapest of (mass) communication tools and rural people can easily obtain it. Radio has the flexibility for playing the following roles:

- A means for the rapid dissemination of key information, in a great many languages, and in geographically vast or restricted areas;
- A platform for dialogue and debate among development stakeholders;
- A platform for rural and urban communities to express themselves;
- A tool for awareness-building and social mobilisation;
- An instrument for research, providing genuine information about rural communities (upwards) to decision-makers.

This is why it is not realistic to seek to divide the ‘clientele’, as some aspire to do, into two opposing groups of urban and rural audiences. Reality is more refined, and the differences and differing lifestyles which are specific to ethnic or community membership – language, gender and age – play an increasingly important role.

The roles and uses of rural radio in the early years of the 21st century will be determined by the forces which separate or bring together existing rural radio stations and community, public, private, religious and commercial services. The end of broadcast monopolies opened the way to a division of tasks and roles. Henceforth the determining factors will be the freedoms, rules and unifying practices needed in the framework of Africa’s emerging media pluralism.

What alliances between public, commercial and community radio services can we expect to emerge in the future? What sets of structures, what regulations, and what other measures will be required to allow commercial, community and public service broadcasters to

coexist? What can public service, commercial and community radio learn from each other? How can financial sustainability be assured?

These are the fundamental questions, inspired by half a century of rural radio experience in Africa, that must be asked as we prepare for the next fifty years.

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Jean-Pierre Ilboudo is the head of the Communication for Development Group in the Extension and Communication Service of the FAO. He is a radio journalist by training and has PhD in Information and Communication Sciences. He has taught radio production and communication sciences in Germany and Burkina Faso and is the former head of the Study Service at the Inter-African Centre for Rural Radio Studies of Ouagadougou (CIERRO). He has written and published numerous articles, studies, manuals and other works in the field of communication for development and rural radio. <www.fao.org/sd/>