



A Passion for Radio
Radio Waves and Community
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Chapter 12

The Hard Lesson of Autonomy: Kayes Rural Radio

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A leaflet circulates among the community of immigrants from Mali now living in France:

You have heard of the rural radio station in Mores. For the past three years, this radio has given a voice to the village populations. It was a training and information tool for the entire Kayes region. Those of us who have left the Kayes region want the radio to continue to live. We have created a support group to allow this to happen.

“These words move us,” said the Italian coordinators of the project. “Could we have asked for anything more when we designed the Kayes rural radio many years ago?”

In 1982 Italian cooperation agencies set up the *Sahel Program*, to work with countries of the Sahel region of Africa in their struggle against desertification of the land. They asked the governments of Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to identify one zone within each country in which it would be possible to initiate an integrated rural development programme. In Mali, the choice was the Kayes region. An animation and training programme for rural development was launched there in 1987. Two Italian non-governmental organisations, Terranuova and Gao, were the promoters and managers of the programme, and the Kayes rural radio was the central component.

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AN ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL AGRICULTURAL INSTRUCTION

The decision to opt for a radio station, rather than a traditional training programme, was influenced not only by political considerations, but also by the geographic, social and economic reality of the region.

First, the geography:

Being geographically isolated remains the region's major problem. Within a vast area, four hundred villages are linked by footpaths in the dry season. In the rainy season they are isolated from each other. A traditional training programme would have had to limit its scope to the few accessible villages along the river bank.

Next, the social situation:

The Soninkés, who have traditionally been involved in trade activities, are the dominant ethnic group in the region. Since the 1960s large numbers of Soninkés have emigrated to France. This social dynamic had contributed to a cultural openness which would support the work of a rural radio station.

Finally, the economic situation:

The region's economy is a subsistence one, based primarily on agriculture and livestock. In this context, the large emigrant community plays an important role in supporting the families living in the rural zones by sending money regularly. This process, which began in the early 1960s, is a major social phenomenon in the region. The emigrants, who have organised villagers' groups and associations abroad, have promoted a series of significant interventions in the social sector (health, village water projects), and in the productive sector (irrigation projects); these activities are in stark contrast to the absence of any government initiatives in the region.

Terranuova and Gao first attempted to better familiarise themselves with the social fabric of the Kayes region. A survey of four hundred villages allowed them to reach over 3,500 people, including village leaders, young people and women. They discovered no fewer than 308 organisations of all kinds, more or less structured, of which 185 were emigrant associations. While a number of these groups appear and disappear quickly, most of the villages have an emigrants' association abroad, which supports local initiatives for social development: schools, dispensaries, mosques. Some of these associations work together to support larger initiatives, all the while tackling the problem of developing projects that are more production oriented.

Certain improvements in traditional practices, supported by a moderate use of the emigrants' contributions, can help increase production, but only as long as local production costs are lower than those of the market. A rural radio station can not only support these actions, but present them in a way that will stimulate other, similar actions. One of the ideas behind the project was that the funds provided by the emigrants of the Kayes region could be invested in social and production- oriented projects and that the value of these projects could be evaluated not by technicians, but by the people themselves. The Kayes radio station was to be a channel that would allow this evaluation.

The original idea to establish a radio station was reinforced by the findings of the village surveys and the better understanding of the nature of the region. The general popularity of radio in Africa was another factor in the decision to establish a radio project. There were already radio receivers in the villages and radio was the only modern means of communication integrated into the daily routines of the villagers. There remained one essential problem: the scarcity, if not total absence, of programming in local languages.

Both local and rural, the Kayes station was intended from the beginning to contribute to the social and productive development of the prefectures of Kayes and Yeliman. The station is located in the region and broadcasts in local languages, unlike the national service of Radio-télévision malienne (RTM) – which broadcasts exclusively from Bamako, the capital, and primarily in French.

HOW TO WORK WITH EXISTING AUTHORITIES

The task of identifying, informing and preparing the various players in a rural radio project is a long one requiring very special care and respect for local customs and existing power structures.

In Africa, rural radio is supposed to stay strictly within the bounds of supporting local social and economic development. It is not supposed to be concerned with political and ideological matters. However, the unstated political purpose of the Kayes station included support for peasant organisations and, at the same time, a transformation of the authoritarian nature of relations between the local communities and central authorities. To be a truly democratic tool, the radio would support peasant associations, acting both as their spokesperson and a point of reference.

Studies undertaken in preparation for the project identified a number of organisations in the Kayes region. L'Union Régionale des Coopératives Agricoles de Kayes (URCAK – Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives in Kayes) was a strong peasant organisation in the irrigated area alongside the river. Equally dynamic grassroots organisations were also identified in the interior zones. Contrasting with these small and active organisations, was the training organisation Opération Vallée du Sénégal, de la Térékolé et du Lac Magui (OVSTM), an organisation with a hundred workers deprived of both initiative and ability for action.

One solution would have been for the peasants' activities to benefit from the technical capacity of OVSTM without funding this costly training machine. But the government of Mali did not want to hear anything of the sort. It clearly demanded that the Italian organisations provide priority funding for OVSTM.

In the end, the participating organisations were able to refuse this demand, on the one hand thanks to terms of the contract agreed to by the government and, on the other hand, to the prestige of the peasant organisations, especially that of URCAK, with whom the final agreements were signed directly.

The Italian NGOs' choice to work directly with the peasant organisations represents the strength, but in a way, also the weakness of the integrated rural

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development programme in the Kayes region: Strength because of the coherence of the overall organisation which supports production and social activities and accentuates a grassroots infrastructure, and weakness because once the contract was signed with URCAK the government of Mali did not show much interest in the project.

Kayes Rural Radio was a novelty in a radio landscape subject to monopoly rule, with only one national station and no regional stations at all. Convincing those in charge of Mali's radio and television broadcasting corporation (RTM) to support the project was the first difficult task. Their agreement was essential since they had the authority to decide whether the Kayes project would receive permission to broadcast, and the project depended on their technical expertise.

In the end, RTM granted permission and provided three technicians and a promise that the person in charge of the rural animation section would visit the project periodically. Further collaboration is foreseen in programme exchanges and in an overall evaluation of the Kayes project.

RTM was much more interested by the experience of Kayes to the extent that it could serve to support RTM's Plan to overhaul rural radio on a national scale. RTM's programming is still anchored in the traditional model of instruction, a model conceived essentially as a means of transmitting the directives of the central authorities for modernising agriculture and livestock farming.

PROGRAMMES, MANAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

On August 1, 1988, the Kayes radio station officially went on the air. Broadcasting starts each day at 9:00 a.m. and continues to 3:00 p.m. It returns to the air at 8:00 p.m. and the broadcast day ends at 10:30.

The skills, training and experience of programme producers at the Kayes radio station are very different from those of traditional communication specialists. Kayes' producers are people from the region with minimal technical qualifications and no radio experience. They are recommended for participation in the project by the social groups, grassroots associations or villagers' assemblies. They follow a theoretical and practical training programme in the use of different methods of radio communication.

Ever since the project was conceived, it has been held that rural radio must rely on the experiences learned from development and not on traditional mass communication techniques.

In its first phase the radio concentrated on those already involved in various social and production-oriented development activities: village spokes people, social groups, grassroots cooperatives. The next phase sought to incorporate social actors whose essential role in development was recognised, but who are not well-represented on an organisational level – women for example. The station was also intended to support the process of transforming social structures, strengthening their more dynamic elements, and contributing to the elimination of obstacles arising from rigid traditional hierarchies.

But it is difficult to change attitudes. People had not received anything but administrative messages from the authorities. In this context, the station's use of local

languages was a key factor for mutual understanding. The programmes were produced in Soninké, the language spoken by 85% of the local rural population; in Bambara, the majority language on a national scale; in Kassonké, a language spoken in certain parts of the Kayes region; and in Peuhl, the language of the shepherds.

At Kayes, direct audience participation is encouraged by dealing with issues of primary concern to the daily lives of the listeners. Training aims to avoid didactic presentations and abstract technical references. The resultant programmes take the real interests of the listeners into account. The programming includes the following:

- *Historical and cultural programmes* strengthen cultural identity. They are based upon the differences between people's experiences, oral history and documentary information. The cultural and artistic heritage of the various social groups is highlighted by recording songs, dances, and traditional events in the different villages. Theatrical and artistic groups in the region also produce radio pieces.
- *Educational programmes* increase the degree of individual and social autonomy, and support collective management abilities. Literacy courses in Soninké and Bambara, accompanied by a parallel literacy campaign in the villages, are the best example of this type of programming.
- *News programmes* support social and economic transformation processes with clear, simple and precise news on a variety of subjects: weather, market information, transportation and health.
- *Development-type programmes* disseminate information about innovative experiences which can be easily reproduced. These programmes cover projects which have been carried out in the region (mills, granaries, solar dryers, village pharmacies), and outside projects of importance, such as agro-forestry (reforestation, the introduction of new types of production, the protection of forest cultures); cottage industry production (support for traditional agricultural activities, experimenting with new techniques).

The radio station becomes a source of news and examples. The testimonies broadcast over the air are credible and inspire change precisely because of the radio's physical proximity. People seek out the source of information and try to understand the proposed approaches. This is not the least of the advantages of this new communication tool. But this "local" radio also attracts a great deal of interest thousands of kilometres away, among emigrants from Mali in France. Their enthusiasm grows during vacations in the villages, where they benefit from news in their national language, and a connection with the activities of their associations. The exchange and broadcast of cassettes fosters a new type of contact.

A DESIRE TO READ

Rural radio must create a desire to read. This assertion, which may seem paradoxical at first, is integral to the literacy programmes, one of the Kayes radio station's essential activities. After two years of broadcasting literacy radio programmes in local languages, the station began producing simple texts in local languages to offer to the newly-literate listeners of the radio. This extension of the radio programmes is

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fundamental, as even the best methods amount to nothing without follow-up. On this subject, Adrian Adams writes:

Literacy is not a natural demand, it does not come from the self. In a context where it (literacy) does not simplify approaches to administrators, leads to no diploma, provides no right to employment, and does not yield access to the press or to literature, it can have the appearance of a path for second-class citizens, indeed, as another interference in village life. Teaching people to read is but the first step, the least difficult step. What is more difficult is to make reading worthwhile. To enhance literacy in Soninké is, by definition, to produce writing in Soninké which responds to the needs and desires of the newly literate. So many literacy programmes around the world have failed at this stage. Rural radio must create a desire to read, to learn, a belief in the usefulness of the written word.

In fact, rural radio must foster a climate which gives value to literacy in local languages. Disseminating works for the newly-literate contributes to this.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The Kayes rural radio is presently confronted by a both financial and statutory crisis.

From 1987 to 1989, it benefited from the financial and technical support provided by Italian NGOs and expatriate Italian personnel. Seventy percent of the project budget was used to set up the station's infrastructure.

In 1989, Italian NGO activities from a general blockage. Mali's request for an extension of the rural radio project thus remains up in the air. The NGO, Gao, invested its own resources for a few months before resolving to look for transitory solutions. What to do? Close the station while waiting for funds from Italy? Or continue programming while at the same time mobilising local and national resources? This latter solution was chosen.

Four associations created a management committee and set about gathering local and national resources. RTM offered to keep its three technicians; telephone costs were to be paid by the Ministry of Communication; employees' salaries were reduced; Gao tried its best to find other sources of material support; electrical costs were frozen by the local authorities and each of the four organisations on the management committee agreed to furnish a monthly fee. In the short term, closing the station was avoided, but the prolongation of the crisis meant that not all of the commitments were respected. At the end of May 1991, the telephone was cut off and the energy supply was threatened by non-payment of bills. Only the associations on the management committee and Gao honoured their obligations. The Italian NGO was confident that the funds from Italy, promised in March 1991, would guarantee funding for three years. But as of February 1992, the money was still unavailable.

The crisis showed that the radio station would not give up out of indifference. The peasants have organised and the emigrant associations are organising in France. But a viable long-term solution remains to be found. Part of this solution will have to be institutional. The Kayes radio station suffers from the absence of a clear legal framework

specifying management structures, the role of the grassroots associations, the role of the State... The associations involved in this radio adventure are unwilling to pursue their commitments without statutory guarantees. No specific legislation for this type of radio exists.

At any rate, the situation is evolving in light of major policy changes underway in Mali. "Free radio" is in the process of being authorised. A decree governing the medium is one of the consequences of a national conference on information and communication, held December 19-24, 1991, in Bamako.

The usefulness of Kayes radio for local development is recognised by all the partners involved. Both the local participants and their Italian partners are aware of the stakes and constraints of autonomy. Autonomy can cost a lot in terms of reduced funding, materials, human resources and technical support. Independence comes at this price.

THE LONG-TERM BET

The troubles of Kayes Rural Radio are classic. They are those of an independent radio station confronted by the need to find funding. But they also involve two other constraints: first, an extremely precarious regional and national economic situation; and secondly, the difficulty of being an international development project. It is a paradoxical situation. But after the first years of material and financial aid, the continuation of any cooperative project becomes complex. In the present case, the help of the last Italian funds will allow the station to benefit from a delayed deadline, in order to prepare itself for full autonomy – a task which must be undertaken immediately.

The Kayes rural radio is betting on the long-term. Approaches to potential partners, coupled with research into all possible funding sources, is essential. There are the fees from rural collectives and emigrant associations, RTM, Ministries and their technical services, Gao and other Italian support, as well as from international bodies such as UNESCO and UNSO, with whom radio production agreements have been signed. Finally, there is the broadcasting of paid announcement and communiqués. There are plans to establish a print shop, necessary for the production of booklets in national languages. And one more original idea has come to light: emigrants in France can now pay for messages and communiqués sent by fax to the station. These messages are then relayed over the airwaves of Kayes radio. Distances are thus shortened and time is saved.

These actions ensure a minimal operational budget, but are not enough to guarantee real autonomy. Luckily, Italian support will continue, but this time more than ever, there must be an awareness of its inevitable withdrawal in 1993. Radio is a powerful communication tool, and its potential must be made known to the numerous international cooperation projects being conducted locally. A systematic approach in this direction is being developed.

In January 1992, an association was formed, l' Association des radiodiffuseurs de Kayes (ARKDR – Kayes Broadcasting Association). It brings together all the other organisations associated with the project along with the technical services of the various organisations charged with rural development in the area. This association, united in crisis, crystallised the will of all the partners fighting to conserve this development tool

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and to continue the actions undertaken – taking into account the economic realities of the station.

Kayes Rural Radio has passed the experimental stage and become a real training and information tool in the hands of the village organisations. This rare case in Africa is a precious example, rich in experience, which we will have to know how to take advantage of.

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