

Radio listening clubs in rural African communities

Rural radio clubs promise future benefits for advertisers and marketers.

Deep in the heart of Zambia's rural and impoverished southern province, where access to information is scarce and local concerns often go ignored, women are making sure their voices are heard... literally.

After Panos provided them with basic radio equipment and training, a group of women in Mazabuka – a sugar-rich farming area below the Kafue River – recorded a programme on their difficulties in accessing clean groundwater.

The programme was played on community and national radio stations, and soon yielded results: the town clerk of Mazabuka Municipal Council promised that new boreholes would be sunk.

Now, as the women seek to hold the government to its promise, they feel a new sense of empowerment. Through their radio listening club, they are also learning new ideas from neighbouring communities on issues ranging from maize production to marital strife. And they have earned respect as educators in the traditional culture of their own village.

Providing a platform

"Before the programme we didn't know how to go about radio production," Dory Ng'andu, chairwoman of the local group, says in her native language of Tonga. "Things have changed. People are happy."

The Mazabuka case is just the latest chapter in Panos Southern Africa's trademark project, which uses radio listening clubs to provide a platform for marginalised rural communities – particularly women – to voice their concerns, hold policymakers accountable, and exchange ideas at the local level.

Since being piloted in 1998, it has been implemented throughout Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe and South Africa, and has evolved into two separate initiatives – *Development Through Radio* (exclusively for women), and a project focused on HIV/AIDS.

The ethos for both is based on the idea that local communities should help set the development agenda. As the most accessible and effective form of media for rural communities on the 'other' side of the digital and educational divide, radio is key to this concept.

Panos Southern Africa works with existing community organisations and provides them with equipment and basic training. The club does the rest.

Using radio to acquire necessities

Each week, the group chooses a topic and records a discussion. A local coordinator ensures the programme is run on a local community station and liaises with an urban-based national radio producer. The producer arranges for a government or NGO official to provide a response, which is then integrated into the programme and sent out over the airwaves on the partnering national station.

The decision makers are listening. For example, in 2003, after women from Chipata, Zambia used their HIV/AIDS radio listening club to appeal for greater access to treatment, the Minister of Health made their local hospital a regional antiretroviral drug distributor.

The project also links rural communities to other NGOs and private organisations. In the Thyolo district of Malawi, a radio group's broadcast led them to secure financial capital from Pride Malawi, a lending institution. "We have been... economically empowered because of the financing we got," one member said.

The result has been particularly important for women. "They are able to speak out. They don't have to depend on their husbands to look after their families – they're able to help them themselves," says Victoria Beenzu, a producer at Mazabuka Community Radio Station in Zambia.

Looking to the future, Panos Southern Africa is focusing on making clubs sustainable amid the financial and logistical difficulties faced by rural villages, and the challenge of getting communities to hold government to account.

Enthusiasm is high, now that the process of radio broadcasting has been demystified. As another Mazabuka participant notes: "Today we know that talking on the radio is not difficult, and through this we're able to get the things we desperately need."

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