Chapter 9

The Russian Rural Information Network

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Introduction

Since the mid-1990s the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (DCFRN) has been thinking about and experimenting with the Internet as a way of supporting its work with radio broadcasters and farmers in developing countries. While not all of our efforts to link broadcast radio and the Internet have matched expectations, we have learned from them. This chapter presents some of the ideas we have had and discusses how they were put into action. It is hoped that the case of Developing Countries Farm Radio Network and its evolving efforts to bridge the development divide using a combination of radio and Internet will serve as example, idea, or lesson for others.

In 1997, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) expressed interest in providing financial support to adapt the DCFRN methodology to support rural development in Russia. CIDA and the proposed Russian NGO partner, the Foundation for Agrarian Development Research (FADR), were particularly interested in including an Internet component to complement DCFRN's use of radio as a support for agriculture extension. The project, which piloted DCFRN's combined radio and Internet approach, was launched in 1998.

This chapter begins with a description of DCFRN and its work and then goes on to critically examine the experience of the Rural Information Network in Russia. The conclusion describes some of the lessons learned and plans to apply these lessons to future projects.

Developing Countries Farm Radio Network

Using radio to share information and promote discussion that leads to sustainable livelihoods in rural areas has been the primary *modus operandi* of the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (also known as DCFRN or the Farm Radio Network) since its start-up in 1979.

The Farm Radio Network is a Canadian-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works to improve food security by supporting and enhancing development communication in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South- and South-East Asia. For many years, DCFRN has focused on identifying useful well-researched information about food production, post-harvest, and nutrition, and then putting that information together in an accessible way and distributing it to community, private and public radio broadcasters in almost 100 countries. The information disseminated by DCFRN takes the form of print packages with simple radio scripts, background information about the farming, food security and health issues discussed in the scripts, and ideas for how to incorporate the information into radio programmes. Broadcasters can select, adapt and translate the materials to suit their own radio programs and the needs of their listeners.

Two central elements of DCFRN work are: the recognition that farmers and rural communities need information; and second, the conviction that broadcast radio, alone or in combination with other methods, is the most effective and efficient way of communicating that information.

Farmers need information on agriculture inputs, innovative and affordable technologies, drought, pests, diseases, credit, market prices and competition. Communities and families need information about nutrition, sanitation, healthcare and so on. But they also need that information to be relevant to their own situations and for it to reach them in an accessible and appropriate way, and from a source they trust. Unless it is successfully communicated, information makes no contribution to food security or human development. "Experience demonstrates that sustainable agricultural development is based less on material inputs (e.g., seeds and fertiliser) than on the people involved in their use. Investments in scientific and material inputs for agricultural production bear little fruit without parallel investments in people."[1]

The rationale for radio in rural communications

Radio is an immensely powerful technology for communication and education. Radio enables disadvantaged groups to engage development agendas that are sensitive to their own needs and aspirations. No other medium has the potential of radio to create conditions that provide people with genuine access to useful information, and to enable them to express their sentiments, opinions, views, dreams and aspirations, fears and insecurities, strengths and capabilities, and of course, their ideas. Radio is a useful tool for engaging communities in participatory processes, and for helping them come to a consensus on their development priorities. Radio can be a conduit between social planners, policy makers and beneficiaries of development programs.

High illiteracy rates and low levels of schooling among disadvantaged groups, especially women, continue to limit their ability to lift themselves out of poverty. Existing educational systems are unable to respond to massively increasing demands for education. Consequently, disadvantaged groups continue to be denied access to information, knowledge, and skills. In response to these conditions, radio can be used at the community level to address directly local issues and needs.

Some of the undeniable strengths of radio include the following:

- It reaches a wider audience than any other medium (ten times more than television).
- It builds on oral tradition, making it more readily adaptable to many indigenous cultures.
- It is the most affordable mass medium. Production and equipment costs are a fraction of television's.
- It is a broadcasting medium (conversely, the Internet is not).
- Receivers are widely available, comparatively cheap and portable.
- More effectively than any other medium, radio can reach people who are isolated by language, geography, conflict, illiteracy and poverty.
- It can facilitate assistance in the early stage of emergencies when other aid is not possible.
- It can play a role in the preservation of local language and culture.
- It can be used both for formal and non-formal education.
- It can add credibility and effectiveness to the efforts of development workers in the field.

Exploring new communication technologies

The appearance of new technologies in the 1990s did not diminish the value of radio for development communication strategies. These technologies do present, however, new opportunities for comprehensive communication strategies supporting sustainable

[1] Loy Van Crowder et al, Knowledge and information for food security in Africa: from traditional media to the Internet. FAO 1998 <www.fao.org/docrep/w9290e/w9290e00.htm>.

development. DCFRN was excited by these opportunities. Radio delivers information to many listeners; but the Internet could enable them to send back information, to ask questions, to request and seek information, and to communicate with specialists. The Internet enables access to information from both national and international sources; radio can localise, repackage, translate and broadcast that content to a wider audience. The benefits of integrating Internet into the radio communication for development program began to be explored.

Of particular interest was the potential of using the Internet to address issues such as the isolation of many rural broadcasters, their lack of formal training (in radio, in food security issues, and in agriculture) and their inadequate financial resources for thorough research and innovative production. An Internet connection in conjunction with radio could deliver:

- better communication between development radio practitioners;
- easier sharing of program ideas, scripts and even audio files;
- increased collaboration amongst agricultural researchers, technicians, agricultural extension workers, rural radio broadcasters and farmers
- more advocacy for radio use amongst donors and aid policy makers; and,
- a cost-effective way of training radio professionals in the specific skills needed for using radio to support food security.

Thus, interest was focused on the use of Internet at an intermediary level, by broadcasters, rather than on trying to reach farmers themselves. DCFRN insisted that there was a continuing role for radio, despite the growing interest in using the Internet as a tool to *directly* serve people in rural areas. It was felt that the convergence of radio and Internet was the most appropriate strategy, rather than using Internet to bypass, or "leapfrog" tried and true methods of communication.

The emerging strategy was based on our understanding of the people being served, in partnership with farm radio broadcasters. Would the average woman who grows, processes and prepares food for her family access and use the Internet in this current lifetime? We were sceptical.

Digital developments

There is no doubt that availability of the Internet is on the rise. However, as knowledge goes online, the Internet is also dividing the educated from the illiterate, the rich from the poor, men from women, young from old, and urban from rural (and, in most cases, English-speaking westerners from the rest of the world[2]). Women need particular access to information. The majority of food producers, family caregivers and household managers in developing countries are women. In rural areas, they are often uneducated and illiterate. They live without access to electricity and telephones. They are unlikely to use a computer in their lifetime.

Furthermore, access was not the only issue grappled with in exploring the use of the Internet for development communication programming. It could not be assumed that simple connectivity would bridge the information gap. Were we, in our enthusiasm to embrace this new technology, overlooking the need for useful information processing and knowledge creation? Were people able to use what they found on the Internet to promote sustainable development? Or were they accessing information that was of no practical use or benefit to them?

[2] Approximately 86 percent of web pages are published in English, and 97 percent of Internet hosts are in developed nations.

Our vision of communication technologies for development encompassed the premises articulated by Gómez and Martínez:[3]

- connectivity is important, but not sufficient to contribute to development;
- equitable access, meaningful use and social appropriation of communication technologies and resources are all necessary to take advantage of opportunities and achieve positive results;
- certain enabling environments must exist for communication technologies to contribute effectively to development;
- risks and threats exist and should be avoided or minimised in the use of communication technologies for development.

This was the same approach to using communication technologies that had served well when applied to a more traditional technology – broadcast radio. In the case of Internet, we remained cautious. How could we ensure equitable access? Could its use be meaningful if the content was overwhelmingly from the North, and generated to serve commercial market interests in the North? Were rural communities in the South equipped to appropriate the technology and use it for their own benefit?

What if we could use the Internet to enhance communication with and amongst the radio broadcasters in the Farm Radio Network? Could they then become access points for their communities? If so, the Internet could be used to deliver information packages to broadcasters, and could also improve the quantity and quality of feedback from them. We began to explore the use of the Internet to strengthen our network and to further develop the capacity of the broadcasters in the network to communicate effectively with their rural audiences.

Early research into the feasibility of converging radio and Internet in the network, however, provided a cautionary note. By the mid-1990s, only a small minority of the radio broadcasters and agriculture extension workers – our key points of contact for the farming communities we serve with our program – reported e-mail addresses. Most had no regular access to the web, and very few had visited our website. We felt we could not yet generate enough participation to test our strategy to combine radio and Internet. Soon, however, we were presented with a new opportunity to develop and test our ideas.

Rural communication in Russia: Context and potential

The dramatic political changes in the former Soviet Union removed the framework within which the rural economy operated. During the Soviet period, political infrastructure was responsible for the distribution of agricultural inputs (including information), and the purchase of agricultural outputs. In the state and collective sectors, all decisions about agricultural practices tended to be made centrally and implemented at the farm level. There was no need to distribute information about appropriate or alternative agricultural practices because officially sanctioned methodologies were determined centrally and disseminated through the channels of political control.

In Soviet Russia, consistent pressure to industrialise agricultural production resulted in a systemic bias against small-scale, intensive and low-input agriculture. Nevertheless, it flourished and innovative small-scale farmers working private plots provided a disproportionate amount of food produce. However, because they operated on the fringes of the agricultural economy, there were few opportunities for sharing innovations within the sector.

[3] Ricardo Gómez & Juliana Martínez, *The Internet… Why? and What For?* (Acceso, IDRC 2001) <www.acceso.or.cr/PPPP/index_en.shtml>.

Furthermore, everyone involved in food production – not just farmers but also the millions of people who planted allotment gardens, and indeed, the entire rural population – needed new information. Printed materials and other potential sources of information had become prohibitively expensive after Perestroika. A new generation of publications, oriented to *dacha* plot owners, had a strong bias towards the marketing of inputs. Russians who had formerly worked on large farming collectives were struggling to make the transition to increased responsibility for farm operations and management, whether as an agricultural cooperative member or as a small-scale private farmer with responsibility for an entire farming operation. They needed advice on how to make the best use of their limited resources in a rapidly changing environment. Some techniques that might have been appropriate to their situation had fallen out of general use. Information about appropriate production and marketing methods, widely applied in other countries, was not accessible to the average Russian farmer.

There was a pressing need for an economical, efficient and non-political means of communication. Small-scale farmers in particular, hampered by inexperience, needed information and communication to help them adapt to the market economy. A communication network which promoted the innovative techniques of small-scale farmers on a wider scale, and which could influence state policy to support their activities, would contribute to food security in rural areas.

Based on our experience with radio and rural communication, we were confident that our program could be adapted to the Russian context. In Russia, radio is ubiquitous. Most farmers listen to it and it is a primary source of information. Radio Russia, a national network with significant resources, is primarily an information network. There are also many independent commercial stations and some not-for-profit stations with a local orientation, frequently including agricultural programming. These local stations, in particular, could provide feedback from the farmers that would provide direction to our program.

Furthermore, there was significant opportunity to converge radio and Internet in our project in Russia. Rural telecommunication centres (telecentres) were being opened in rural areas to provide farmers with community access to the Internet and by 1997 Internet access was available in about 70 rural centres. Some agriculture collectives already had their own e-mail access.

The situation in Russia appeared to meet three conditions that would enable us to take our project beyond mere connectivity:

- connectivity was available at a reasonable price, ensuring some degree of equitable access (despite somewhat unreliable telecommunication connections);
- there was a potential for meaningful use of the Internet, due to high literacy rates and some familiarity with information and communication technology in rural areas;
- with some provision of content to inform and "kick-start" discussion of issues, there was an opportunity for people to use the technology to solve concrete problems, contributing to decentralised decision-making and innovation diffusion, which were important to promoting sustainable livelihoods in rural areas.

Project objectives and methods

The broad objectives of the four-year project (April 1998 to March 2002) were to enable farmers to increase food production, to improve the health and living standards of the rural population, and to support sustainable, appropriate communication among farmers and other rural stakeholders.

These objectives would be achieved by:

- providing agricultural information to farmers (with a particular emphasis on helping farmers adapt to agricultural privatisation initiatives);
- providing information about practical ways to improve health and build sustainable livelihoods in rural areas;
- developing close links with the intended users of the information, thereby creating opportunities for increased participation and horizontal communication, ensuring the relevance of information provided and discussions facilitated.

A further objective to decentralise DCFRN operations and decision-making processes was to be achieved by structuring the project to be managed largely by FADR in Russia, with DCFRN having responsibility for consulting, monitoring, and providing project information when appropriate.

Approximately 300 members were recruited to the network. As planned, members used information provided by FADR and DCFRN to enhance communication with their audiences. Information was distributed in hard copy (printed "scripts" and newsletters), and was also available on the Internet. Information stimulated discussion and generated feedback from farmers and other rural people to the project partners. This feedback was used by the project partners for further project planning.

The project quickly gained popularity. Agriculture communicators in regional training centres and *technicums*, and others from large-scale agriculture development projects such as the World Bank-funded ARIS project, responded immediately to information that dealt with the current situation in Russia. A farmer information needs assessment had revealed an overwhelming demand for practical information about marketing, the changing legal environment for farmers, and farm/business management. There was also a need for information about low-input agriculture, due to the limited financial resources of farmers, exacerbated by currency exchange rates. Print journalists also joined the project, using the scripts and newsletters as a source of information for magazines and newspapers directed at farming communities.

The Rural Information Network website[4] was popular, and was continuously enhanced and made more interactive. In addition to posting information that was also available in hard copy, the website featured:

- a virtual library of agriculture-related information;
- an electronic conference, FADRnews, with various and changing streams of discussion;
- links to other on-line resources related to Russian agriculture;
- AGROMARKET, a bulletin board where visitors can post notices and seek buyers and sellers for agriculture-related products and services;
- Farmer-to-Farmer, a bulletin board where farmers could share on-farm experiments, innovations, questions and concerns with their peers.

In the fourth year of the project, the website was generating more than 500,000 hits per month, by approximately 55,000 unique visitors.

Lessons learned

Two main aspects of the project were particularly successful.

[4] <fadr.msu.ru>

First, the information generated by the project was both welcome and widely respected. Farmers, agricultural extension workers, and community leaders all reported that it met a real need for current, reliable information in a changing environment. The project also generated new, localised, information. In the first half of the project, much of the information shared amongst members was based on DCFRN scripts, adapted by project staff, or was a result of staff research. By the final year, however, half of the scripts were based on information from farmers and other network participants. This made it possible for the project to focus on local issues, and to explore international issues from a local perspective.

Second, the information was accessible to farmers and other people in rural areas. Prepared scripts – responding to needs at the local level – were distributed to 300 Network members in 59 regions in Russia, who were points of contact for an estimated 1.4 million people. Workshops offered by project staff provided basic orientation to the site and training in Internet search techniques, giving them access to the discussion groups and other information on the project website and the Internet. Even farmers who did not use the Internet benefited, since community centres, regional agriculture colleges and extension centres were now better served by educators and extension workers actively participating in the Network.

There was, however, little evidence of effective convergence of radio and the Internet. In adapting the DCFRN methodology to the Russian context, FADR had concentrated on DCFRN's approach to content – making complex technical and scientific information more accessible to intermediaries (agricultural extension workers, teachers, etc.). But there was no corresponding focus on radio. Instead of radio scripts the information was formatted as information sheets, to be printed and distributed directly to extension workers and farmers who were part of the network, rather than to be used in radio programs. Network members were also encouraged to access the information directly on the project website.

Although the project was providing much-needed support for agriculture extension services (which often consisted of isolated field workers left behind by other international projects), and for those farmers already in the network and with the means to directly access the Internet, it was not realising its full potential to serve rural communities. Farmers who were not served by "traditional" extension services, and farmers who could not directly access the Internet were still without the information and communication channels they needed. In Russia, as in other countries where DCFRN is active, these are the poorest, the least educated, and the most isolated and marginalised people in rural areas.

In the third year of the project, steps were taken to increase the participation of radio broadcasters. With the cooperation of one participating member radio station, programs were recorded and distributed on CD-ROMs for re-broadcast. A few radio broadcasters participated in training, which was essentially an orientation to the Internet, so that they could download audio files from the project website, join a discussion group that was set up especially for them, and even upload their own recordings. Now, in the fourth and final year of the project, these actions are showing results. Participation of radio broadcasters is increasing; member stations are contributing audio files to the project's archives; and traffic to the radio-focused web pages is on the rise. Radio stations are now taking on a role as intermediaries, using project resources to produce appropriate radio programs for a wider audience.

Keeping radio in the picture

The experience of the Rural Information Network project has been useful to the project partners and beneficial to the participants. The network continues to be a important vehicle for exchange of information among stakeholders in rural development and is a trusted resource for farmers needing accessible, appropriate information about food production, agriculture marketing, and the legal context affecting rural people.

Despite its success, however, we do not plan to replicate this project model elsewhere. We believe that the project did not reach its potential because it did not effectively use the most accessible and appropriate medium available in rural areas: radio. Especially in Russia, where the Soviet regime put a radio receiver in every home and developed a tradition of getting information from radio, this medium must be a key component of any rural communication strategy.

We believe that we can improve on results in future projects by modifying the project design to pay more attention to radio and, in particular, to the convergence of radio and Internet. Because we wanted our partner to chart appropriate in-country strategies, we did not explicitly state the media to be emphasised. As a result, the project followed a "multimedia" strategy, with a focus on Internet and face-to-face extension. While this allowed flexibility and local determination, it did not put an emphasis on more innovative possibilities. The Internet is an attractive option: it is relatively easy and inexpensive to make information available, and results are easy to define in terms of website traffic. But it has very limited reach in rural areas. Extension is also a satisfying communication option: use of the project information is easy to measure, and feedback from farmers is easy to obtain. But traditional extension can cost 3000 times more, per contact hour, than radio.

Radio challenges project managers: writing for radio is a particular skill, and results of information use and impact are more difficult to measure. But the reach of radio, and its ability to generate discussion and participation at the grassroots level – especially important in a country struggling with the legacy of centralised planning – is undeniable.

For future projects, we will invest more in the radio broadcasters themselves. The Rural Information Network provided free and reliable information that could be used in their programming, but the information was not distributed as radio scripts, but as information sheets. Poorly funded and inadequately staffed radio stations had to invest significant resources to "translate" the information back into radio language. Thus, participation in the project required significant investment by the radio stations. In future projects, we will invest in them.

Training, peer-to-peer networking, exchanges among broadcasters and between broadcasters and other stakeholders will occupy as much space in our planning, our budget and our evaluation as the information product for which we are known. Farm radio programs are extremely challenging to produce. Complex information, often requiring understanding of scientific, technical and legal issues must be conveyed in clear, concise language in a limited amount of time. Radio broadcasters are also under pressure to produce entertaining programs to attract listeners. Farm radio broadcasters need training, and they need the support of their station management to be able to attend training sessions. Future DCFRN projects will ensure that investment is made in broadcasters, to help them produce programs and access local resources and experts.

Future projects will also leverage the resources of our international network. This project was designed to respond to Russian needs and the Russian context. It was an opportunity to provide locally specific information and resources. But our concentration on Russia, combined with our "hands-off" approach in an effort to let our partner take the lead, resulted in a project that was isolated from the experience of our partners in Africa, South America and elsewhere. Future projects will ensure that there is an international exchange of information and experience.

Prospects and plans

At the time of writing, the Rural Information Network project is coming to a close. We hope to secure funding for a second phase that will build on the network already established and implement lessons learned over the past four years. The second phase of the Rural

Information Network will focus clearly on radio broadcasters as priority members. Priority activities will include:

- providing reliable information for food security, sustainable agriculture and rural livelihoods;
- networking rural radio broadcasters to enhance their understanding of the role of farm radio broadcasts in developing and sustaining healthy communities;
- promoting the exchange of audio materials and leverage of local resources;
- providing specialised training for rural radio in areas such as audience research, content development, participatory approaches, station management and media ethics;
- facilitating international exchanges to promote further learning and best practices.

The Canadian International Development Agency, which has provided more than financial support throughout this project, has expressed interest in a second phase of the project. Other agencies are also supporting radio and Internet initiatives in Russia.

This donor interest coincides with a growing radio movement. Across Central and Eastern Europe, radio stations have multiplied in recent years. In Russia, there are now hundreds of radio stations, opening the way to radio that meets the needs of rural communities by bridging the gap between grassroots needs and views on the one hand, and local and national policymakers on the other. With appropriate support, this new generation of radio can bridge the digital divide.

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