

Communication and literacy for the empowerment of rural women

News from the Niger listeners' clubs

The idea of linking up the literacy centres run by ONG VIE Kande Ni Bayra with community radio stations first came up in 2006. Now, four years later, that idea has become a reality. Some 300 community listeners' clubs have been established near literacy centres in the Téra, Gaya and Dosso regions of southern Niger and this cooperation is facilitating rural women's access to information and communication for development.

Since July 2009, the Listeners' Clubs project¹ has been working to break the isolation of rural populations in Niger. The principle is that giving rural populations, women in particular, access to reliable information of their own choice should enable them to participate in community life and development. The project is expanding rapidly and has just been extended to include the communities of Falwel and Tanda thanks to the implication of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

In a little over a year, 300 community listeners' clubs – 200 all-women, 89 all-men and 11 mixed clubs – have been established with the Nigerian organisation ONG VIE Kande Ni Bayra, which is implementing the project. Between them, these listeners' clubs have mobilised more than 1,500 women and men and involve nine community radio stations in Téra, Bankilaré, Gorouol, Dantiandou, Kiota, Garantchéday, Gaya, Tanda and Falwal.

Radios and solar telephones, essential tools

The project has definitely improved rural populations' knowledge of new technologies, such as solar-powered radios and mobile phone 'fleets'.

Initially the project provided each club with a solar wind-up radio and a mobile phone fitted with a solar charger to enable the radio stations and clubs to work together. The aim of the approach was to give women, young people and men a chance to develop leadership skills.



The members of the Kiota listeners' club at the project's launching ceremony in Dantiandou, in June 2010.

Very soon, the success was so great and demand so high that the clubs were given additional means of communication. About a hundred additional mobile phones were distributed to the listeners' clubs. These phones were linked up in a network known as a 'fleet', enabling cost-free communication at any time between the clubs and radio stations.

Mobile phones are now also used to communicate between villages about subjects as wide-ranging as social events, rainfed crops, the cost of agricultural produce and livestock, or to offer products for sale. However, the telephones in the 'fleet' also serve as public telephone booths, allowing private calls to be made against payment of a modest fee. The revenue collected this way is used, amongst other things, to pay for charging and maintaining the telephone's battery. In future it may also help to cover the cost of the telephone subscription.

Testimony – Mariama Hassane from the Fogou listeners' club

"What was our latest topic? The day before yesterday we chatted about malaria and all the issues associated with it.

To combat the disease, we need to improve domestic hygiene. We were told to remove the weeds from around our homes because that is where mosquitoes lay their eggs. We also need to remove any small containers, tins or puddles from near the house because they are breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

In the evening we have to take precautions as soon as the sun goes down by using our mosquito nets, even when we're up chatting.

We have also learned to identify the symptoms of the disease and as soon as we think someone has it, we have to take them to a dispensary urgently. So there you are."

Testimony – Moctare, VIE, Téra region

“The last programme I tuned in to was devoted to a case in a village where an 11-year-old girl was going to be married off while she was still attending school. People intervened to convince the parents, especially the father, who had taken the decision, that it would be better to let the child continue her schooling. The villagers also contacted the local authorities to ask them for their view on the matter. The mayor of the village said on the radio that if the father went ahead with his plan to give away his daughter in marriage in spite of her young age, he would be sent to prison.

The other villages responded by recounting their own experiences, though what they had to say concerned events that had already happened. This case was different, because it concerned a situation that was ongoing and over which the women leaders of the listeners’ clubs and the radio station had some influence.”

For women, the telephones have also facilitated the creation of a social network, enabling them to communicate with other women they do not actually know and to exchange information beyond the topics covered by the clubs (the first rains, what will be planted, etc.).

Flexible organisation

The listeners’ clubs themselves decide how they are organised. As a rule, club members in each village divide themselves into three sub-groups, one of which consists of men only, to listen to programmes and hold regular discussions. Whenever a topic is deemed to be of high importance to the community, the clubs invite the community radio station to record a summary of their views on the subject. The ensuing recording is edited by the radio station’s technicians, who received digital reporting kits from the project. The edited piece is then broadcast on the radio, prompting immediate responses – by mobile phone – including opinions, remarks, observations and suggestions and this often results in the launch of a whole new debate.

So far, the clubs have covered a wide range of topics, including food security, off-season crops, agricultural inputs, human, plant and animal health, education, decentralisation and even the culture of peace.

Holding topical debates and listening to radio programmes gives the participants fresh knowledge that enables them to improve their daily lives. For example, after one series of programmes, action was taken by men and women together to clean up several villages.

Women’s empowerment

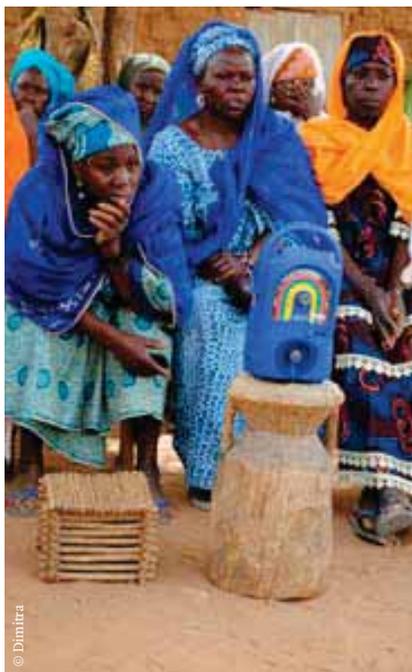
The enthusiasm of the women in the listeners’ clubs has exceeded all expectations. Whenever they can find the time, they will tune in to programmes independently. It is clear that the women are now aware of the existence of rural radio stations. And they know the people working there, which facilitates information sharing. Even though the role and mission of community radio are still poorly understood, women now dare to contact them and are enthusiastically taking part in the debates. These are indicators that they have gained new skills and, above all, that their self-confidence has been strengthened. As they say proudly: “information is no longer the exclusive preserve of men”.

Ali Abdoulaye, the coordinator of ONG VIE, put it this way: “Women never used to have a say. They would sit down behind the men, and even when they were asked a direct question they would turn to the men, the only ones to have travelled and have an opinion worth hearing. Today, those same women are aware of their knowledge, they state their views, contradict imposed opinions and organise themselves so that they are respected and listened to. The women’s debates have shown that they are perfectly capable of analysing and summarising.”

For the women, the clubs’ activities also provide moments of leisure, and sometimes the chance to settle conflicts, after a stressful day.

Multiple impact

The project has yielded many benefits; improving rural women’s access to information has also generated unexpected effects, such as a revival of the literacy centres. As Ali Abdoulaye pointed out, before the clubs were



© Dimitra

set up in the villages the usefulness of being able to read and write was not that clear to women. “They thought that learning such skills would never be of any use to them. But using new technologies has made them discover the need to communicate – to write, to read messages. This has increased their interest in the literacy centres.”

For more information, contact:

ONG-VIE Kande Ni Bayra
Ali Abdoulaye, Coordinator
B.P. 349
Niamey, Niger
Tel: +227 20 752560
Tel/Fax: +227 20 755448
E-mail: viebayra@intnet.ne

Gender training for journalists, an absolute necessity

In the context of the Listeners’ Clubs project, a training course on Gender and Radio Broadcasting Practices was organised for radio journalists from 31 May to 4 June 2010 in Niamey.

ONG VIE Kande Ni Bayra brought together around 20 journalists from the nine radio stations involved in the project. Each station was represented by two people: its director and the person serving as the focal point for the Listeners’ Clubs project.

The course helped to strengthen the participants’ capacities with regard to interviewing, gender and technology. The aim was to enable radio staff to conduct high-quality interviews in terms of content (preparation, execution, critical listening) while emphasising the importance of the participatory dimension of the mission of community radio. An essential element of the project was also to look with the participants at exactly how they could best integrate a gender dimension into their programmes. Finally, they received basic technical training in the use of the digital reporting equipment they had received.

The staff composition of the partner radio stations explains why women were very poorly represented at the training session, accounting for just 2 out of the 17 participants. Further training courses given in the field should enable a higher number of women to become involved in the project’s activities.

1 The full name is «Clubs d’écoute pour l’autonomisation et le leadership des femmes rurales et des jeunes des centres d’alphabétisation» – Listeners’ clubs to foster autonomy and leadership among rural women and young people from literacy centres. The project is financed by FAO (via the Dimitra project), UNPD, UNIFEM, UNFPA and the Canadian Development Cooperation.