

# COMMUNITY LISTENERS' CLUBS EMPOWER RURAL WOMEN AND MEN



**WORKING FOR** rural men and women in Africa

**WORKING TO** improve access to information and give voice to rural women

**WORKING WITH** informal groups, producer organizations, local NGOs, local, provincial and national government bodies

**WORKING THANKS TO** Belgium, IFAD, UN Women, UNFPA, UNDP, UNICEF

Give women access to information and the possibility to communicate and they will change the world. That is the premise behind the FAO Dimitra community listeners' clubs – groups of rural women, but also men and young people, who meet regularly to discuss development issues and challenges, and to find solutions together. Working with community radio stations, which produce interactive radio programmes in local languages to increase knowledge and understanding of issues important for the communities' lives and livelihoods, the listeners' clubs empower their members to become actors of their own development.

The clubs are equipped with wind-up, solar-powered radios and, in some cases, fleets of solar-charged cell phones. As the members discuss topics, sharing their concerns, priorities and needs, their conversations are aired live on the partnering radio station or recorded for later broadcast. This stimulates discussions in other clubs – in turn aired by the radio station – focusing on concrete actions that can be taken in the community and keeping



**Thanks to improved access** to information and a powerful participatory communication approach, villagers in isolated communities across the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Niger are making strides to improve gender equality and empower women. FAO Dimitra community listeners' clubs are helping rural populations participate in the development of both their communities and themselves. The clubs enable members – women, men and youth – to share concerns and take collective action. Collaborating with rural radio stations that feed and broadcast their discussions, the clubs have become agents of change in agriculture but also in other aspects of society, taking on sensitive issues such as HIV/AIDS, early marriage and the rights of women to inherit land. The approach boosts members' self-confidence – especially women's – and raises awareness about the needs and priorities of rural populations. Members have played crucial roles in helping resolve community conflicts peacefully and giving rural women an increased role in decision-making. Dimitra's grassroots success explains its growth. Since its 2006 launch in DRC, Dimitra spread to Niger in 2009 and by 2012 reached a combined total of 1 000 listeners' clubs with roughly 24 500 members and direct beneficiaries, and 147 000 indirect beneficiaries. New Dimitra community listeners' clubs are being created in Burundi, Mauritania and Senegal.



*Working with community radio stations, the listeners' clubs empower their members to become actors in their own development.*

the conversation going among all the Dimitra listeners' clubs in the area. This in turn encourages members to become ever more engaged in the topic at hand.

### **IT IS NOT JUST TALK**

Because discussions are always action-oriented, clubs build members' skills in such areas as: agricultural and livestock practices, reducing food shortages and strengthening resilience, hygiene and sanitation, health and nutrition, and food safety. As a result of its exchanges, the listeners' club in Tera, Niger, proved instrumental in alerting local officials about locusts in the region in September 2011. Simply by preventing livestock from wandering, Kiota's club members have reduced animal waste in public places and are encouraging neighbouring villages to do the same. In the DRC, thanks to Kapolowe's listeners' club, villagers have become self-sufficient in producing cornflour. This has inspired the village chief to give the club a community field for market gardening, the proceeds of which provide club members with additional income.

### **BEYOND AGRICULTURE: AGENTS OF CHANGE**

In the DRC's war-torn South Kivu province, where an estimated 40 women are raped every day, a discussion initiated by the Dimitra listeners' club in Mugogo about sexual violence and HIV/AIDS prompted an increase in voluntary screening and a change in attitudes. "Before, women victims hid themselves. They were ashamed," said Jocelyne M'Mananga, president of the club. "Now, they come to ask advice and help, and to tell their story."

Similar results have been seen in Niger, where Fogou's broadcast on malaria, Gassedá's focus on the problem of early marriage and Albarkayze's emphasis on the benefits for mother and child of giving birth in maternity centres rather than at home, all prompted a decrease in risky practices.

In Niger, thanks to the Dimitra clubs' frequent broadcasts on land access for women, rural councils around the commune of Dantiandou guaranteed women the right to inherit land with retroactive effect, resulting in one woman finally inheriting her father's land 20 years after his death. Having learned how to express their views publicly, women of that same

club successfully negotiated with male landowners and community authorities for an official 99-year lease on a 2.75-hectare plot of good land to grow vegetables. In Borobon, the village chief invited three women club members to participate in traditional village meetings where key decisions are made. In 2011, some women club members from the communes of Gaya, Kiota and Tanda were elected to public office as *conseillères communales*. In South Kivu, when the fertile wetlands along Lake Kivu were being grabbed to grow sugar cane, threatening food security in the area, members of the Bugobe and Mudika-dika listeners' clubs met with authorities, who levied a high tax to discourage sugar cane farming. As a result, 70 percent of the wetlands were returned to growing fruits and vegetables.

---

*By preventing livestock from wandering, club members reduced animal waste in public places and now encourage other villages to do the same.*