

# DRC | Dimitra community listeners' clubs and poverty reduction, a Forum to share results

The first Dimitra Community Listeners' Clubs Forum for Tshopo District was held on 9-10 August 2013 in Isangi, in the Orientale Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It offered a unique opportunity to meet, discuss and share experiences to the women and men representatives of 60 Dimitra community listeners' clubs (CLCs), seven community radios and various key actors, closely or loosely linked to the CLCs. The clubs have been set up in barely a year, in the framework of a gender-sensitive project to fight poverty and improve food security, implemented by FAO and financed by the Government of the DRC and by IFAD. This article talks about the Forum and provides some data and anecdotes which highlight the successful wager made by those who opted to bet on this innovative approach.



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Elysée Otondja gets to her feet and announces, with a mixture of pride and astonishment: “I have been chosen as president of a Dimitra listeners' club. Me! I would never have believed it.” Sitting next to her, Françoise Oleke rapidly nods her head: “And what about me! I had my head in the clouds, I had no idea, I never spoke out and now... I do!”

The role play is well under way. Everyone plays the role of a listeners' club member and shares ideas and impressions on the changes that the club has brought to their lives and to that of

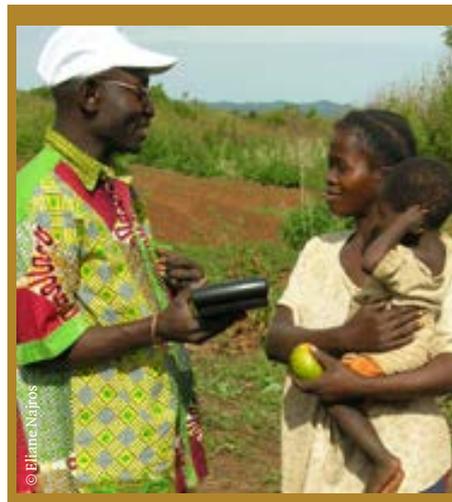
their community, and to the efforts to reduce poverty in rural areas. Amid general enthusiasm, reactions follow on from one another: “The club has shown me how to eat properly, with more varied meals”; “You can work on your own, but there is strength in numbers. Here, we share ideas and work as a team, with everyone mixed together, even the poor!”; “Now we can eat together and there are fewer nutritional taboos for women”; “We have decided to repair the track so as to get farm products in and out”; “I was not used to speak-

ing out in front of men; it wasn't the custom”. This enactment of the impact achieved by the listeners' clubs in Orientale Province took place as part of the first Dimitra Community Listeners' Clubs Forum for Tshopo District. For two days, gathered for the occasion 60 club representatives (roughly divided between women and men), the seven Tshopo community radio stations involved in the project as well as United Nations' Radio Okapi, ten government representatives at provincial, district and local level, several traditional chefs and social leaders, representatives of farm producers' unions and other project partners, such as the NGO Inades-Formation.

## A forum for sharing, discussing and making decisions

The objective of the Isangi Forum was to share experiences and identify the changes brought about by the Dimitra listeners' clubs for the project's 18,000 beneficiaries in 167 villages. The Forum also enabled participants to highlight the difficulties encountered and to debate the future of the clubs.

The participants flocked to Isangi by canoe, ferry, bike, motorcycle and raft to take part in this unusual forum-meeting. The proceedings were marked by the use of methods that reflected the key principles and dynamics of



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## The voice of Phuna Mabika Dakeini fell silent

He was a radio man, and for many years he shared his enthusiasm and skills for the benefit of FAO's communication projects. Phuna's last contribution was to the Dimitra community listeners' clubs project in the Orientale Province. He worked with passion for what he deeply believed in: a development based on the voice of the people and using community radio.

Today, the Dimitra team, FAO and the listeners' clubs in the DRC are in mourning. Goodbye Phuna, your voice is silent, but continues to resonate with us all.



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Photo exhibition of Dimitra community listeners' clubs in the DRC and other African countries organized during the Forum.

## Achievements of the Dimitra community listeners' clubs project in Orientale Province

Aster Bashige, the coordinator of the “Listeners’ clubs, fight against poverty, food security and gender” project, recalls that the Isangi Listeners’ Clubs Forum follows on from almost a year of activities to raise awareness, offer support and training to women and men listeners’ club members. These activities were carried out with the support of Inades-Formation DRC, in all the Basins and areas of intervention of the Agricultural Rehabilitation Programme on Orientale Province (PRAPO), namely Isangi West, South, North, East, Basoko (Lileko) and the areas of Kisangani (Bengamisa, Ubundu and Wanyarukula). “I should emphasize the real enthusiasm of the communities invited to meet up through the listeners’ clubs and the remarkable dynamism of the club members and community radios that have embarked on this adventure,” he adds.

The figures speak for themselves: 240 villages were visited to raise awareness on the listeners’ club approach and gender, including the administrative, political, religious, traditional and municipal authorities; almost 18,000 people were directly or indirectly involved in these activities; 325 women and men listeners’ club members and facilitators of farmers’ organizations were trained in the approach,

as well as in gender and participatory monitoring; 23 people from 7 community radios were trained in participatory communication and production techniques for interactive programmes.

Today there are 60 Dimitra community listeners’ clubs in Tshopo District, covering 167 of the 317 villages, counting a total of 2,275 members, about half of them women. The listeners’ clubs meet once or twice a month, to discuss their needs and priorities. They contact the radio stations for additional information, listen to the broadcasts and debates of other clubs and, most importantly, take decisions and act together to improve their environment and livelihoods. In order to improve access to information and facilitate dialogue, each listeners’ club has received a solar-powered and wind-up radio set as well as a bicycle.

Aster Bashige points out the behaviour changes that he has observed: “The CLCs have promoted self-sufficiency and participation of women, households and communities. These days, people think about the community and the richness of their listeners’ club.” The project has gone a long way in a short time span!

### Access to information and expression

One issue raised by the majority of participants was the importance of access to relevant information as requested by the clubs from the radio stations. For many women living in rural societies, where often the men own and monopolize the radio sets, having access to a solar-powered radio – “No need to buy a battery!” – is already a victory. But many people also highlighted the privileged relationships with community radio stations and the chance to interact on themes of common interest through the medium of radio.

“Before, the radio did not come to the villages. Now, they are present and tuned in to the communities they serve and to the CLCs that discuss people’s problems and to which people listen”. People have begun to take ownership of the radio stations. In the words of one woman participant at the Forum, a member of a listeners’ club, what counts is giving everyone the chance to have their say. “There is more openness because you don’t have to have studied to be able to talk on the radio!” she says.

Radio is not just a hobby: “Before, I did nothing but listen to music on the radio. Now, I am interested in programmes that talk about development issues,” comments a member of a youth listeners’ club in the Eastern Basin during a plenary session. “Not to mention the fact that it offers a chance to listen to programmes as a family and that the information benefits the whole community. Everyone follows the broadcasts”, he adds.

Recurring topics chosen and addressed by the clubs included malnutrition and food groups, health (malaria and sleeping sickness), sanitation, horticulture, group sales, buying inputs, livestock keeping, etc.

### Behaviour change

Often, the discussions of the Dimitra listeners’ clubs lead to a rethink of everyday practices. This is a key factor since development is first and foremost a process of change aimed at producing better living conditions. Since rural development is at stake here, the changes produced by the clubs are varied, but they are always linked to the daily life of communities and households.

For example, it took just a few meetings and one “Mums and dads united” radio programme to convince families that a meal should be varied and that you can put rice and pundu (cassava leaves) on the same plate. And yet, it is not so easy to change dietary habits! One woman representative of a club from the Yanonge area remarks that previously, “people lived on purchased products. Now, many CLCs have small vegetable gardens”. There are many examples: in Lilanda, niébé (cowpea)

the listeners’ clubs: self-organization, willingness to listen, freedom of expression, equality, concern for equal participation by men and women, building on experiences, action and creativity.

The two Forum days allowed the remarkable results obtained by the clubs to be put under the spotlight, ranging from the high level of female participation in a region where traditionally women never speak in public – especially not in front of men – to the visible changes seen in various aspects of daily life

(agriculture, diet, relationships), to collective and individual initiatives implemented by the clubs.

Restitution in plenary from the Forum’s working groups took place in a relaxed atmosphere. Words and ideas poured out thick and fast, but similar themes soon emerged as people talked about their ideas and experiences, revealing a number of common features as regards problems identified, issues addressed, activities undertaken and difficulties encountered.



seeds were a problem due to their low yields. The CLCs asked for support to improve their yields, which has increased their production and revenues. In Yabaondo, a listeners' club has collected funds to rent two rice fields. The club has subsequently produced 1800 kg of rice and seeds.

Observers have also been astounded by the collective initiatives undertaken by listeners' clubs: the Bosau CLC requested and obtained the loan of a community field. Members have taken turns to work in the field and the club reports that there has been an improvement in food security.

One club member from the village of Yanfole recalls that "the dirt road was very bad and the village isolated. With the listeners's club, a decision was taken to repair the road. The first vehicle to get through was that of the sleeping sickness programme. After the primary healthcare services, the traders have started to arrive". The same has happened in Weko, where the CLC has mobilized the community to develop access roads, and in the village of Yalibwa, where access to drinking water was a problem and the CLC has constructed two water points with local means.

### **The men pound the cassava while the women go out fishing!**

The Forum's working sessions pinpointed another phenomenon in which no-one would have believed just a year ago: the changes in gender relationships, including task sharing within households. One listeners' club member, still astonished by this positive develop-

## **Radio stations: the voice of communities for communities**

The dynamism of the community radios in Tshopo District and their collaboration with the listeners' clubs have been crucial. Seven radio stations – Radio Kulukoko, Radio Mabele, Radio Yanonge, Radio Bondeko in Isangi, Radio Boboto, Radio Mwangaza and Radio-Television Bondeke-Isangi (RTBI) have committed themselves to the CLC adventure. Especially striking are the collaboration agreements that have been signed between listeners' clubs and community radios. These charters enable the construction of solid working relationships and help both parties to work more effectively. Some 45 broadcasts on various subjects requested by the listeners' clubs have already been produced, compiled and broadcast by the community radios. Topics have included how a CLC works, sanitation, literacy, agriculture and livestock keeping, distribution of farmwork between men and women, aquaculture and horticulture.

The radios have played a very active role in the Listeners' Clubs Forum and several of them were keen to share their vision and express their satisfaction with the listeners' club approach.

Joseph Bassay, from the RTBI, stressed the CLC's role in bringing communities and radio stations closer together.

"For us journalists, the CLCs have revolutionized our work. Now, when we go into the communities, people know who we are and we feel like members of that community. And the communities participate in the radio broadcasts. The programmes have been reworked to take the community's suggestions on board. It's radio by communities, for communities!" Talking about the pro-

grammes, he continued: "They are more interesting when women are involved. They are richer and more participatory, there are lots of good ideas: people listen and like hearing themselves on the radio."

He insisted on thanking the CLCs which have organized themselves to support their local radio station. "There is still much to be done, but the CLCs have the will to solve problems. The question remains the material." The stations have received technical support, so to put them in a better position to answer the needs identified by the clubs, including recording kits and training in radio broadcasting production techniques. But other needs remain.

Joseph Bassay ended by observing that this is "the very first project that has brought communities and radio stations together". Today, he says, not only is there a symbiosis between the CLCs and the radio stations, but the CLCs have become something in which the entire community feels involved. "The radio also needs to support the clubs, to make sure they do not collapse."

Sylvain Loula, from Radio Boboto, observed that before "we spoke on behalf of the people. The training sessions were important in helping us to see and produce differently, in a participatory manner."

Henri Ngoie, from Radio Kulukoko, went even further, recalling the lack of participation before the existence of the CLCs. He echoed the representative from the Belgian Technical Cooperation (BTC), who participated in the Forum and declared that previously there had been no interactivity between radio stations and the people.

ment, told at a plenary session of the Forum that "these days, the men pound the cassava!" And the audience reacted with warmth and laughter when a woman club member declared: "Before, the Lokelé women did not fish; now, we have our own nets and we too have become fishers. We have been waiting for this for a long time!" Even domestic and sexual violence have been discussed within CLCs. There is still much to be done, but it is an important step in the right direction to see that such sensitive subjects are now being talked about.

The public and traditional authorities are also playing a role, and important synergies have indeed been developed with the listeners' clubs. For example, in Yabaondo, the territorial administration has set up a local development committee and, under the influence of the CLCs, has decided to respect gender parity (14 men and 14 women) on the committee. In Yanonge, at the request of a listeners' club, the authorities have set up a gender and family service.

### **The State has arrived!**

The CLCs are considered a valuable tool for the public authorities. These latter respond to the requests of the CLCs, especially on issues of health and sanitation. The government has supported such requests by offering hygiene advice on how to clean up farm plots. This has been followed by radio broadcasts and discussions with Dr. Ley from the general hospital of INERA Yangambi in an effort to combat diseases linked to dirty hands.

The Inspectorate for Agriculture in Tshopo District has recently supplied 15 listeners' clubs with hoes, spades, shovels and rakes to help maintain farm tracks so as to reduce isolation and get agricultural products to markets. These were listeners' clubs that had already carried out this kind of work.

With an exclamation of triumph, one participant summed up in four words one of the effects of the dynamic efforts of the clubs in their village: "The State has arrived!"

## Collaboration with government services

In September 2012, during the launch workshop for community listeners' clubs in Kisangani, two government inspectors said they looked forward to seeing this new approach give "fresh impetus to the whole development system."

François Bassay Baloimba, District Inspector for Agriculture, convinced of the power of participatory communication, said that "the participation of everyone – women, men and even youth – makes sense. It is through everyone's contributions, in searching for solutions and taking action, that rural development will be supported." He also stressed the importance of government services working in synergy with the clubs, for "we cannot be everywhere, but thanks to the clubs, we will be kept informed by the grassroots communities."

For his part, Richard Azelito, Provincial Inspector for Rural Development, spoke

of the need to address gender issues, since "in rural areas, the bulk of the work falls to women. Reducing women's workload and increasing production are both ways of reducing poverty." He also underscored the role of "the valuable tool offered by community radio, which will make it possible to spread the listeners' club messages to other communities, based on an analysis of the clubs' experiences and decisions. If it works, it will have a knock-on effect throughout the District and the Province."

After one year of implementation, has there been such a knock-on effect? We put the question to François Bassay, who was in Isangi to take part in the Listeners' Clubs Forum. Constantly moving around Tshopo district on his motorbike, the government inspector told us what he has seen and experienced over the past few months. "The CLCs demonstrate that men and women are able to find solutions to

their problems. The CLCs have unleashed the spirit of creativity!" he confirmed.

"As an inspector of agriculture, I find that the CLCs facilitate our work with the population. There are exchanges and synergies between the agriculture services and the CLCs. Our technicians are trained, so they can offer relevant support to the community."

With a faint smile, he tells a story: "This really struck me. I was on mission in the field and everywhere I went, the first question anyone asked was if we could set up a listeners' club! Villages were arguing with each other to get a club. And when I asked the question: are you part of one of the Basin's farm-based organizations, people would often reply: 'No, I belong to a CLC!' Why all this enthusiasm? Because the CLCs have achieved a great many results, things have happened concerning taboos, behaviour. That is of interest to us, and it is a positive sign that things are moving."

## Social mobilization

Working together – that was the overwhelming idea to emerge from the Forum's working groups. The participants reached agreement on the fact that "men and women must work together for development," as said Sister Berthe. It needs to be a collective effort, which will enable communities to mobilize, the CLCs to network and, ultimately, the entire population to participate actively.

The issue of social cohesion and unity within communities was also raised on several occasions. "Thanks to the CLCs, men and women are coming together and learning how to handle their differences."

The importance of breaking out of isolation was also considered to be critical. In the South Basin, "the CLCs have organized themselves entirely of their own initiative to meet and exchange ideas," observes Aster Bashige, the project's coordinator.

The CLC members themselves acknowledge that social mobilization has led to less of a wait-and-see attitude and more self-development for club members and the community in general. Some CLCs have even collected contributions to pay the fuel for the generators of some radio stations which were no longer able to broadcast due to lack of funds. Some members, such as Marguerite (see the Portrait on p. 8-9), go even further and believe that the clubs will gradually turn into producer organizations: "The listeners' clubs take action and don't make empty promises. They are producer organization and listeners' club at the same time and this approach also strengthens existing organizations and unions."



Célestin Banyanga of the Tosalisana listeners' club in Likango.

## Women's voice and decision-making

Another significant aspect underscored on several occasions is the importance of giving a voice to women and encouraging women's leadership. This was perfectly summed up by a listeners' club member who said: «Women, once in the background, are now on the right path.»

In this respect, several CLC members observed that "the capacity of women to analyze their problems is more evident thanks to radio, and the traditional chiefs are increasingly asking

women to give their opinion during community meetings" – a first for this society! "Women are speaking out, and it's not just the older, wise women," added one of them. A female listeners' club member reported that the traditional chief of Kombe has even decided to prepare women for the upcoming local elections!

In the cité of Yanonge, women have formed an association in an effort to tackle discrimination issues and have approached the local chief, who has appointed a gender officer for the area.



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Group work at the Isangi Forum.

### Difficulties too

The CLC delegates and other actors have also conferred to talk about the difficulties encountered, the solutions found and what still needs to be done in order to strengthen the existing clubs and ensure their long-term sustainability. Aside from questions linked to the functioning of the listeners' clubs, which members are learning to resolve together, all the participants commented on the importance of ensuring strong and regular support for the listeners' clubs.

The CLCs also observed that if greater empowerment is to be achieved, technical training needs to be made available on issues such as agriculture, sanitation, etc. Requests for these training initiatives are directed at all development actors working in the area.

It is important to reinforce the lessons learned, support changes, ensure sustainability and

monitor closely. That is what everyone is hoping for, and was summed up in the words of one participant, who said: "A man cannot father children from a distance."

One thing is certain, the Isangi Forum proved an important occasion for all the actors involved in the FAO-Dimitra project: community listeners' clubs, community radios and other development stakeholders. It offered an opportunity to build momentum and jointly reflect on the experiences so far, the problems encountered, the results obtained, the changes brought about by the listeners' clubs and the future they face. But it also provided an extraordinary opportunity for participants to meet one another, united by the approach and their enthusiasm, as well as the results obtained and current and future activities.

There can be no doubt that the strong involvement of women in both the clubs and the

Forum reflect an improvement in their status and an important shift in the attitudes of communities. Given their soaring membership levels, the positive momentum built up by the Dimitra listeners' clubs almost certainly heralds further interesting developments in the course of the next month.

✳ **For more information, contact:**

- Aster Bashige, Project Coordinator  
aster.bashige@fao.org  
+243-99-1858834
- Christiane Monsieur, FAO-Dimitra,  
christiane.monsieur@fao.org

## Collaboration with community leaders

Is there anyone who doesn't know Chief Guillaume Maingolo Bondjala? This chief of Babelada sector, Isangi District Territory, is a community leader in charge of 48 villages (about 60,000 inhabitants). There are 10 Dimitra listeners' clubs in his territory. He is also a member of a producer organization (Bolingolo) which has managed to put aside small quantities of stored crops and organize group sales. But Chief Guillaume is also known for the example he sets within the community since the CLCs were set up and he attended the decentralised training sessions on gender

and participatory communication. Today, he can even be seen sweeping his compound and bringing his children to school!

Asked about this unusual behaviour for a local chief, Chief Guillaume, who took part in the Isangi Listeners' Clubs Forum, replies that while travelling throughout the territory he has observed "a change in mentalities. As an individual, I take over from my wife, I look after our plot of land and I wash the children. Before the CLCs, I didn't do this. According to local custom, a traditional chief should not do such things!"

"Even in the fields, it is the man who clears the land and the woman does the rest. In my case, I also help with the sowing. Other villagers have started to do the same because it reduces the workload of the women."

"I am happy to contribute to the advancement of women. I was also proud to see my wife give a speech on 8 March last year. As for change, it will come about gradually. What is important is that other traditional chiefs have done the same thing: they are putting all this into practice," he concludes.