

South-South cooperation: Dimitra community listeners' clubs launched in Senegal and Mauritania, with the help of the clubs from Niger

In order to help listeners' clubs launched recently in Mauritania and Senegal to benefit from the experience of Niger, a series of local training sessions was held in the Senegal River region, as part of the Integrated Production and Pest Management (IPPM) Programme. Cooperation with Niger ensured the successful completion of these activities.

Since 2013, 48 Dimitra community listeners' clubs (CLCs) have been set up in the border region of the Senegal River (northern Senegal and southern Mauritania). Launched as part of FAO's IPPM programme, with technical support from FAO-Dimitra, the listeners' clubs project has gained rapid momentum (see page 6), notably thanks to the field knowledge of the IPPM team. The long-standing presence of this team in the area and the trust they developed with the communities have been pivotal in the setting up of 24 Dimitra listeners' clubs in Senegal, in the departments of Podor and Dagana, and of 24 clubs in Mauritania, both in the Senegal River region.

The Dimitra CLCs are spaces for autonomous participatory communication that are gender-sensitive and action-oriented. They seek to improve access to information and communication for rural communities, especially women and young people, so as to promote their socio-economic and political empowerment, as well as food security. This approach, which has proved its worth in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Niger, is also working well in Burundi and Ghana.

The CLCs project in Mauritania and Senegal is particularly innovative due to the complementarity between the Dimitra listeners' clubs and the Farmer Field Schools (FFS). Both are participatory approaches developed by FAO to help reduce poverty and hunger and strengthen social cohesion and collective action.

As part of this methodological alliance, the clubs provide support to the Farmer Field Schools in the area of gender-sensitive participatory communication in rural areas. Each CLC has between 15 and 30 members from the community who join the CLC on a voluntary basis. These are mostly people who are active in the Farmer Field Schools.

The listeners' clubs work in partnership with rural radio stations, which broadcast in local languages. Radio programmes are prepared on themes chosen by CLC members. These generally revolve around food security, nutrition,

farming practices and access to land, education and services, but they also deal with social issues, such as violence against women, reproductive health, etc.

During the radio broadcasts, the club members engage in active listening, followed by discussions aimed at finding solutions and making decisions. The club members subsequently investigate courses of action for implementing the activities agreed. The CLCs bring about significant changes in the agricultural sector, but they also strengthen social unity, by giving a voice to all. In addition to raising gender awareness in Farmer Field Schools, the listeners' clubs open up opportunities for networking and sharing good practices, between the clubs and with their communities. As a result, both the CLCs and the Farmer Field Schools have an impact on the entire community.

Exchanging experiences and good practices in Senegal and Mauritania

Whether it be at local, regional or national level, the initiatives of the Dimitra community listeners' clubs are geared towards networking and sharing experiences. In Niger, FAO and the local partner organization have set up more than 630 community listeners' clubs since 2009, for a total amount of more than 12,000 members, both women and men. It was therefore a logical move for Niger to make its considerable experience available to other clubs in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Farmer Field Schools of the Integrated Production and Pest Management (IPPM) Programme already benefit from the Dimitra community listeners' clubs

A few months into the alliance, the IPPM programme drew up a first positive assessment of the FFS-CLC partnership.

* For the communities, the launch of the Dimitra clubs has offered a space for everyone wanting to become involved in community life and the activities of IPPM. The inclusive and transparent nature of the approach prompted keen interest from community members, as illustrated by the case of the village of Fanaye (see page 6).

* The system used (three separate groups per village: young people/women/men who also meet regularly in village assemblies) ensures the inclusion of all, enabling the "voiceless" to make themselves heard, especially women and youth. This has strengthened their leadership and self-confidence.

* The IPPM facilitators are convinced of the potential of the approach to reach the entire community. Setting up clubs helps to avoid misunderstandings among people living in a given area. Community participation developed through the clubs has proved to be a perfect complement to the participatory dimension used during training in Farmer Field Schools.





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At the end of March 2014, a series of training sessions was organized for the Farmer Field School facilitators (who also follow the activities of the Dimitra listeners' clubs) and community listeners' club leaders.

Training for the supervisors of the Dimitra community listeners' clubs in Senegal (IPPM staff who facilitate the FFS) took place in Saint Louis. This strengthened the participants' capacities so that they would be better able to provide better support to the listeners' clubs. Keen to highlight the participatory nature of the Dimitra approach, the supervisors took the unanimous decision to change the term "supervisor" to "facilitator".

The training sessions for facilitators centered on the setting up of listeners' clubs (driving membership to the initiative within the communities, setting-up listeners' clubs, identifying and discussing themes. Practical aspects were clarified with participants at village and listeners' club levels (organization, discussions, sharing and synthesis, implementing activities, monitoring changes made, etc.), with a special focus on the facilitators' role in this process.

Training was also conducted for CLC leaders, following a similar programme to the one used for the facilitators and taking the practical running of community listeners' clubs as the main theme. The sessions explored in detail the various stages of clubs' internal functioning. These included identifying and prioritizing themes, building up a list of themes for the club and/or village (a reserve of topics to be addressed), implementing activities and monitoring implementation.

The role of leaders was also analysed. Their responsibilities include organizing and facilitating meetings, monitoring the implementation of decisions taken and communicating with facilitators and partners. It is important to adopt a truly participatory approach, which means to ensure the full involvement of all members in discussions and in the activities to be implemented, as well as to build on lessons learned.

During the training sessions, other important issues were systematically addressed, especially gender, which is an integral part of the approach. The discussions also focused on the relations with the radio stations; preparation of reports on CLC activities – crucial for evaluating the changes brought about; linking clubs with each other and ensuring effective monitoring.

After the training sessions, leaders of the Senegal and Mauritania clubs organized village meetings to pass on the skills and information they received and apply their new knowledge, so as to bolster those clubs that are still not working efficiently. The facilitators are well-equipped now and will be able to better support the CLC process.

In the end, the South-South cooperation, facilitated by FAO, enabled 16 facilitators to be trained in the practical side of the listeners' club approach, and 48 CLC leaders from the two countries to be trained in club management, with the support from facilitators and project organizers. The methodological alliance between the Dimitra listeners' clubs and the Farmer Field Schools was clarified at a practical level and offers promising scope for the future.

Check-list for facilitators to ensure successful launch of a CLC

- Explain the need (why set up a CLC?)
- Conduct a participatory diagnosis (understand the baseline situation)
- Have a "good entry point" into the village, at least one resource person who is familiar with the village and community
- Raise awareness within the village
- From the outset, underscore the importance of finding internal solutions to problems (awareness raising and village meetings)
- Involve the whole community, taking care to ensure a high degree of representativeness from the various components of the village (social groups, neighbourhoods, POs, etc.)
- Promote and develop existing strengths in terms of organization and human resources
- Strengthen the capacities of focal points (facilitators, leaders)
- Ensure that village meetings are well prepared
- Ensure that actors engaged in the CLC process have a strong sense of ownership
- Consider the gender dimension in all activities
- Avoid overlapping responsibilities (especially with other organizations)

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