

TARGET: Zero Hunger

Episode 12 – The listening revolution

[Sandra] Hello and welcome to Target: Zero Hunger – a podcast that explores the food challenges and solutions of our time, brought to you by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization. I’m your host, Sandra Ferrari.

[Clip: Women singing, fade under narration]

[Sandra] The song you’re hearing was recorded during a recent visit to Niger –in Africa’s Sahel region. My colleague Christiane Monsieur recorded it.

The women sing about men leaving the village and abandoning their wives and children. In the song, these women learn to farm and take care of themselves -- improve their lives. Then, the main singer calls for everyone -- men, women and young people -- to get involved in the search for knowledge.

[Clip: Women singing, fade out]

[Sandra] For today’s episode, we asked Christiane to document her trip to a handful of villages in Niger. These villages organize *Dimitra Clubs*. Today, there are more than 1000 of these clubs in Niger alone. And their numbers keep growing.

Christiane will be joining me in the studio later to help me understand what role these clubs play in a country like Niger – particularly for women. But first, here is Christiane, arriving in one of the villages...

[Clip: Arriving in village, sound of villagers chatting]

[Sandra] We’re in Gogayzé, some 45 km north of Niamey, the capital of Niger...

[Clip: Villagers chatting, fade under narration]

[Christiane and Eliane describing what they see in French]

[Sandra] The two women you’re hearing are Christiane and her colleague Eliane Najros. They are greeted warmly by a handful of villagers as they’re making their way to a large gathering in the center of the village.

Christiane and Eliane notice right away how neat and orderly the community looks. There are solar panels; there are faucets for running water - something which is not standard in this part of the country.

[Sandra] To their right are all the women and children in bright, colorful dresses. On the left, there are the men and the village authorities.

Then, a man calls the group to order. And one by one villagers step into the circle to tell a story about change in their community. Like this young man...

[Clip of villager describing the project to clean up the village]

[Sandra]: It turns out, the fact that the village looks so neat is not a coincidence. It’s the result of this young man’s Dimitra youth club, mobilizing to clean the public spaces and prevent trash from piling up everywhere in the village. Creating their club, he says, has given them the opportunity to address difficulties they identify in their village.

Christiane and Eliane traveled to Niger to meet with communities like this one. Because they were eager to hear how people are using the clubs to address all kinds of challenges.

[Clip: Fade Applause / clapping]

[Theme music in]

Sandra: In communities all throughout Niger, there's been a quiet revolution going on. Its protagonists are tens of thousands-strong. They organize in local groups of women, men and young people. Their goal? Mobilizing communities to find local solutions to local problems – from stray trash to malnutrition.

Their method sounds simple – but has proven to be transformational in hundreds of villages across the country: listening to each other.

[Theme music out]

[Sandra] Christiane. Welcome to the studio.

[Christiane] Thank you.

[Sandra] So let's start with the big obvious question: what's a Dimitra Club? And how do they work?

[Christiane] Ok - well, Dimitra Club is an informal group of people - men and women - who have decided on a voluntary basis to get together to tackle their common problems. Community problems. And the problems that isolated villages often have in sub-Saharan Africa. They want to resolve them so they get together, they discuss them, they try to find measures to with local resources to resolve the problems they have.

[Sandra] What would be an example of that?

[Christiane] It might be education; it might be agricultural. It might be sanitation.. can be health problems. It can be anything that regards their lives - they daily life.

[Sandra] What food related challenges does FAO hope to address through the Dimitra Clubs? And why did FAO develop this kind of method to address them?

[Christiane] FAO developed this kind of approach, the Dimitra Club approach, because participatory communication is very much important in rural development. What do we mean by "participatory communication"? It seems like something quite strange. It's not at all. It's just enabling the people - men, women, youth - to participate and have a voice in development - rural development in this case. With regard to regard nutrition, in particular, this is very important, because communication as you know is an essential part of development. Nutrition education is important. Messages are important, but most important is to make sure that the people real owns the process - owns and understands well and have the opportunity to discuss these issue and decide by themselves that they want to change the way they eat, which is quite important. Can you imagine yourself: If I tell you tomorrow you have to eat this and that and not THAT anymore, well it would be a problem.

[Sandra] Tell us a bit more about your visit. What did the communities look like when you arrived?

[Christiane] Well, Niger is a land-locked Sahelian country. This is very arid, no water. So when you arrive in these communities you have nothing and suddenly you have the village, which is usually not that big. People are waiting for you because, you know, it's something, it's a privilege of them to receive visits. It doesn't happen very often. They are very landlocked. They are very isolated. So when people come to visit their village, well it's a very special event. No electricity, no power. The road is very bad. Part of the road to go there to that village of part of it is good - the first part let's say to Dosso and then it was sand. Sandy roads. And so very difficult - the access is very difficult to these places.

[Soundbed Village sounds, greetings]

[Christiane] So this means that when there is a visitor, everybody is there. Everybody - the village leaders the village authorities, but also men and women, they wait for you queuing at the entrance of the village to say welcome to you.

[Clip: Children cheering when car arrives. Christiane speaking with them]

[Sandra] This is you interacting with some of the children in one of the villages...

[Christiane] Yeah.

[Sandra] You ask them if they all go to school and they say yes.

[Christiane] Exactly. It's a very a very beautiful moment always in all the villages I've been in Niger because you can see that there is a lot of emotion, a lot of things happening inside.

[Sandra] Let's listen to a clip from an interview you did with a young woman, called Amina Sevigny. She's 35 and member of a Dimitra Club called Ecouter Tegoiser. And you asked her what has changed in her life thanks to being part of a Dimitra club.

[Clip with Amina – in French]

[Christiane] What seems important to you among the things that have changed for you thanks to Dimitra in your life?

[Amina] Today, thanks to the Dimitra community listeners' clubs, women feel closer to men. I think that they are also more organised than before. These Dimitra clubs are also a way of sharing experience between them but also with "white people". [Fade under narration]

[Sandra] Amina says that the clubs allow women to share skills and experiences with each other. They learn about goat rearing and other activities that can generate income. And women now feel closer to men.... Can you elaborate on that a bit? How are gender dynamics addressed through these clubs? Why, for example, are there separate clubs for men and for women? Why are they not all meeting together?

[Christiane] Why? Because men and women cannot meet together. It's very difficult. It's not - well you know - the social rules, the social norms don't make this possible to really gather in small groups. So, they decide, the club decided themselves that they should be separate. So there are usually two or three women's Dimitra Clubs in one village; one of men; and one of young people. Sometimes there also separate young girls and young women and young men and then they prepare themselves to - you know - for the final discussion, which will be the village assembly with the village leaders, the traditional authorities.

[Sandra] In one of the recordings you brought back, a woman leader named Ruma Kantama came forward to speak. And she said that, on a personal level, since she joined the club, her husband now comes to her in the evening to discuss and decide on household matters together. That was not the case before.

[Clip in local language. Local leader starts by introducing her] My name is Ramu Kantama from Club *Valeur Ajoutée*. I'm a leader, but my personal change is that after arriving at the club my husband in the evenings comes to me to together discuss and decide on household matters. That's new to me.....[Male leaders speaks...] [Fade clip under narration]

[Clip OUT, everybody clapping]

[Christiane] It's very difficult to imagine that but in the Niger society, in particular, women in the rural world, women don't speak up. I mean, they can't do that. They can't just even sometimes in their own household, they just can't - you know - talk with their husbands. And you could imagine that in public, even less and so it's very important that that voice, they have a voice. - That voice should come out, up. And through the Dimitra Clubs approach, this happens really, this happens. And this is one of the things which have been mostly also underlined by all the stakeholders, actors, even by village leaders - men village leaders, very tradition, you know, and saying that things have changed in the village. Where the FAO Dimitra Clubs have been implemented/created today women... talk! They take the words, not only within the household, but also during the village assemblies which are organized after Dimitra clubs have met to prepare their - points to be discussed during the assemblies. So this is a change which we can't imagine how big it is. It's really something very, very new.

[Sandra] Niger has been struggling with food insecurity for the last few decades. Niger's national food security initiative *Troisenne* – or 3N -- has been a big supporter of the listener clubs – in part because of the women's empowerment component.

[Christiane] yes, exactly.

[Sandra] You talked to Amadou Aticou during one of your visits -- He's the coordinator of 3N in Dosso, a city in the South West of Niger.

[Christiane] Yes.

[Sandra] Let's hear what he had to say.

[Clip in local language dubbed]

[Amadou] You know that in Niger, for the vast majority of women, when it comes to giving a public speech to decision making, they are not really involved. They are not at the heart of the decision making process. But with this program women are now completely amazed. They are more aware of the situation. This program has contributed to raising awareness among women. Women are more open minded. And now, what's interesting, they are no longer scared of engaging in a public dialogue. They can now follow discussions and understand the decision making process. And it is very important for a Niger citizen to see a woman speaking out in public, in front of a male audience.

[Christiane] So - the 3N initiative... just to remind you is the 3N is for the, "Nigériens Nourissent les Nigériens"

[Sandra] Nigeriens nourish Nigeriens...

[Christiane] Exactly...

[Christiane] ...and this is an initiative which has been created in order for the country to have a proper strategy to contribute, to make sure the Niger people don't suffer anymore from hunger and malnutrition. So it's a very important initiative, which is being implemented in the country. Now, the relationship or the relation with the Dimitra Clubs approach is quite interesting because this initiative is working basically as an implementation strategy at commune level - that means the municipality level. On the contrary, the Dimitra Clubs are at village level. So thanks to this and the approach of the club, communication improves a lot and they have the opportunity to really be in contact and in touch with the village level through the Dimitra clubs and the people themselves.

[Sandra] So - Amadou brought up the introduction of new farming technologies. What are some of the local challenges that organizations like 3N hope to address through the clubs?

[Christiane] There is one element in Niger which is very important: it's climate change. And because of climate change, new technologies - improved seeds, access to water, new technologies, are very important in this context.

But as you know, new technology need to meet the agreement of the people in the communities. It's not that you can introduce new technologies without having these very important steps of discussion, and have the people understand it. And also have their feedback, because they might also have technologies themselves - traditional ones maybe - which have been forgotten that could be retrieved. There is a very big program which is beginning now in Niger. It's a government programme on resilience and climate change. This is funded by the World Bank and FAO is participating in this project. And in this context of climate change of resilience, the Dimitra Clubs are going to be used as a strategy to make sure also that the farmer field schools have their gender dimension and communication dimension, but also the whole project to make sure that these new technologies, which are foreseen in the project will be discussed, will be better known at village level...

[Sandra] And the clubs use radio to share their experiences with other communities.

[Christiane] Yes.

[Sandra] How does that work?

[Christiane] The one thing that FAO Dimitra provides to the community is this very beautiful blue radio -- solar powered crank radio that the community and the Dimitra Club in particular will be able to use to listen to their favourite programs. There are quite a lot of community radio stations in sub-Saharan Africa. It remains the only really powerful media in the rural world, even in Niger it's the case. That means that having this radio that works without battery, people will be able to have better access to information to begin with. But not only. There are also partnerships that are being established with these radios between the Dimitra Clubs and the radios in which the community radio decides to have a program once a week or once a month or twice a month -- it depends on them -- in which they are going to give voice to the Dimitra Clubs in order to talk about what they've been discussing, what they've been doing, what they've been achieving. So these information are broadcast on these community radios. This means that not only the village of the Dimitra Clubs will listen to the program but also other villages, other clubs in other villages, and this creates an improved communication. Listening to these programs people are curious, and they come to the villages and see what the people have been doing. What the members of the Dimitra Clubs have been doing. And they decide to meet and continue to exchange on anything they might be interested in. It's very important because access to information is basic to help people make decisions regarding their own life.

[Sandra] I saw this really wonderful footage from one of the clubs. And all of these women were sitting around a table and then one woman brought out this radio -- I'm assuming it's the ones you provide -- it's a blue radio the size of a shoebox. And then she's cranking the crank and getting it going and then sets it on the table and then they all listen to this program. So if I'm correct, what happens is a local community radio producer will come to the Dimitra Club and record a session and then will produce a program around that and then airs it up at a particular time and different communities can tune using these crank radios? To listen...

[Christiane] Exactly.

[Sandra] Wonderful. So, what stood out to you most from the stories you heard on your trip?

[Clip: village chatter IN]

[Christiane] There is probably one thing which impressed me so much. It's really a change that you can feel in the dynamics of the village itself. But the dynamic is incredible. People are able to do so many things without receiving inputs from outside. Without receiving anything. It's just a matter of feeling confident and the Dimitra Club approach provides... enables people to gain confidence... and the dynamism is incredible, really incredible... women, men, young people... And the village leaders are the first to support this approach because this support helps them to better manage their village. They have beautiful villages, things are better managed. There is social cohesion. Men and women are there in peace. There is a school being built up, there is a new health center so the women don't have to walk 15 kilometers to go to a health center. It shows really how powerful such an approach

is. It's not because it's powerful itself, but because people are great, because people are dynamic. And this is something maybe that is important to say because often people from outside go, "Projects and everything," and they go, "these poor people can't do anything." No! They can change their own life. And this is the proof. You can see that in the village. You can feel it.

Sandra: We have a nice clip, from a religious leader, addressing you at one of the gatherings that speaks to this.

[Clip: Translator for chief]

Hello. I am the religious leader of the village next door, called Dar Soilin.... [Fade voice under narration]

[Sandra] Can you summarize what he's saying here?

[Christiane] This person was a religious chief, but from the village next door -- so he was not from the village we were visiting. And I can remember quite well, because people were also commenting on this after. He said he was very proud of this village for all the things they had been mentioning. And he said he was even more proud than the village itself, because he thought it was incredible.

[Chief Clip out]

[Christiane] The Dimitra mechanism and the village club dynamism that I was telling you about before means that people now are confident enough to go to the village leader, the village chief, and negotiate a piece of land or negotiate that the village leader will contact the municipality and the authorities at a higher level to get the authorization to use a well, for instance. So they feel confident enough to make sure that things are changing. Another point is that dynamism and success attracts success, and attracts funds, more resources. I could mention the case of Banizoumbou, which is a village in Niger. Thanks to the Dimitra Clubs they could create a woman's group first and then the village leader, through the process of negotiation which lasted for months, the club got piece of land for 99 years... 99 years! Well, that's quite a long time. It's not very usual in the context. This means these women began cultivating this field and selling the produce and also consuming the vegetable. So that improved obviously their diet. Well, this was such a good example that other people came from Niamey. I can't remember exactly -- I think it was three hours or four hours from Niamey. This means an American foundation came there and saw that, and provided the fences for the plot. Then the government came and said, "Well that's great! We have a well we could provide for the community to use." Another foundation, an NGO, etc, etc... So success attracts success and success attracts resources. This is something really important to notice. When I'm talking about Dynamism, it's really about this that I'm talking about.

[Sandra] From your experience working with the clubs and seeing their impacts, what would you say is the unique value of these clubs in the local context in a country like Niger?

[Christiane] The unique value is the capacity of a single approach to empower people and dynamize entire villages. And I must say, enable people -- even the poorest and most marginalized ones -- to believe in themselves, to believe in their capacities, to improve their livelihoods. So this approach is not about discussing or about communication -- it's about action, it's about behavior changes and not induced by external actors but of the people themselves, from the villages. I think we should really stop thinking of people as passive beneficiaries.

[Clip: Village chatter up/Goodbyes]

[Christiane] People themselves really do have the capacity to change things. And it can be in a very difficult country like Niger, but the same thing happens in the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the Dimitra Clubs, we have so many great experiences. But also in other countries like Burundi and Senegal and now Mali. So I think this is a great approach, because it is really about providing this capacity to change gender relations, to achieve gender equality. So change their lives.

[Clip: Village chatter OUT]

[TZH theme music IN]

Sandra: Development is more than a set of targets – It's a process that involves people. Whether it's improving nutrition or increasing access to health care, for development initiatives to be successful, they need to serve the needs of communities and they need to build buy-in among the people. Dimitra Clubs do just that.

By bringing women, men and young people to the table... by calling on their creativity to solve problems and developing their confidence to negotiate with authorities for resources to realize their ideas, the clubs builds a culture of action. One that empowers people to be agents of change in their own lives.

This episode has been produced by Kim-Jenna Jurriaans and myself, with very special thanks to Christiane Monsieur for collecting these stories from Niger for us. If you have any questions or feedback for us please write to FAO-audio@fao.org. I am Sandra Ferrari. Thanks for listening.

[TZH theme music OUT]

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