DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Drying Tomatoes on the Air
Eva-Maria Verfürth / Joseph Sekiku

In 2006, Joseph Sekiku was the first to introduce radio to the Karagwe region in Tanzania, where no radio or TV signal had ever reached before. But back then, Sekiku was not a journalist – he just had some ideas he wanted to share with poor farmers on how to sell their products better. Via radio, he has managed to save some of them from poverty.

You were voted leading social entrepreneur by the NGO Ashoka for improving economic opportunities for small-scale farmers. But you are also the manager of the FADECO community radio in Tanzania. How are these two things linked?
The main incentive for my activities has always been helping the people in my homeland. 99 percent of Tanzanians are farmers, many of them run poor small-scale businesses. They are cut off from all information channels and therefore lack knowledge of simple agricultural techniques or fundamental information about markets. Composting for instance, which is essential to farmers, is unknown to most of them. That is why many years ago I began inventing technologies to improve the situation of rural farmers. To spread these ideas, I had to go into media – and that is how I became the founder and manager of FADECO.

So the starting point was your mission to help farmers. What tools are you developing to support them?
Most don't have the capital to go big, so it's not about turning them into huge businesses, but about advising them how to run small farms better without significant financial means. I focus on processing and preserving technologies, such as cooling mechanisms as substitutes for fridges. Farmers often have huge amounts of crops at harvest time and if they can't sell them quickly, they decay. One very simple and effective tool for solving this problem is the tomato drying box. The farmer needs to build a small box with a plastic roof on it and make two holes in the side walls to allow air to blow through. He then cuts his fresh tomatoes into slices and puts them into the box, which he places in the sun. In just a day these slices are completely dry. Now they won't rot anymore, so the farmer can sell them at any time of the year and – because of their reduced weight – at much lower shipping costs. In my house I also installed a solar cooker and I run a generator on heating oil. I have even developed techniques for improving sanitation facilities or handicrafts production.

You spent over ten years experimenting with these techniques. Why did you turn to media in the end?
The desire to spread my ideas was my initial driver. But furthermore, I am convinced that the poverty in Tanzania is basically due to a lack of information. All media stations are based in Dar es Salaam in the southeast, and none of them reaches as far as the poor northwestern regions. So farmers are cut off from the fundamental information they need for accessing markets. They sometimes don't even know what is going on in the next village. Even though in one village they might harvest huge amounts of tomatoes and only a bit further away people may be in need of them, the vegetables rot because the inhabitants of the two villages don't know about each other. With FADECO radio I want to bring people out of the information void and foster economic and social development.

You tried out different distribution channels to spread your ideas before founding FADECO. Why didn't they work?
In the beginning I designed booklets to explain the technical inventions. Later I wrote a whole newspaper which I posted on huge boards in the main squares of the villages, which I called the news

spot. But printing is expensive, transporting the paper to the villages too, and not everybody there can read, so the project failed. Then I discovered how to receive internet via a WorldSpace radio receiver and focused on that.

In other words – before you began broadcasting, you used the radio as a tool for receiving the internet?
Yes. If you connect a WorldSpace radio to a computer, you can actually access the World Wide Web. After discovering this, I ran a library from 2004-2007 where people could read books and use a computer. I also gave workshops on how to use the internet there, but it wasn't that effective. I mean, what good is an internet receiver if nobody can afford computers? And why should people pay for internet access if they can't even read or write? When I was about ready to give up completely because of all these obstacles, a participant at a conference in Benin recommended broadcasting to me. And it worked!

Neither newspaper nor internet were attractive or affordable to people in Karagwe – but radio was. Why?
Radio is entertaining and practical. Even if you can't read, you can understand radio. People can continue to use it even after dusk because listening doesn't require electric light. The energy supply in Karagwe is very unstable, but since you can receive radio on a mobile phone too, that is not a problem as long as your phone battery lasts. For me radio was the best choice because it reaches a lot of people at very low cost. For a radio station you only need a computer, a transmitter, an antenna and a microphone. I also installed a wind turbine because of the unstable energy supply – that's it. I trained some people from Karagwe to be journalists and now the FADECO staff includes 7 people working in the office and 17 volunteer reporters in the villages.

Since no radio signal had ever reached Karagwe before, I suppose people didn't have radios at home. How did you get them to start listening to your programme?
I went to four villages with a present: I gave a radio and speakers to one family in each village. When they turned on the radio, the whole neighbourhood could hear it. As a result, once I started broadcasting, people also began buying radios. Nowadays when they buy mobile phones, they try to get one with radio reception. An estimated 25 per cent of all inhabitants have radios now, a few more of them possess mobile phones.

What is FADECO about? I suppose you can't fill a whole radio programme with agricultural innovations alone.
Fadeco is defined as development radio, impartial and explicitly non-religious. The content is supposed to serve the listeners in Karagwe, so the range of topics is wide: Since the weather forecast is important for farmers, we transmit it daily. We report on banana prices in the markets of the closest cities around. We also explain new legislation and how the world market functions. We cover health issues, report on HIV/Aids and explain how to prevent Malaria by using mosquito nets. Of course, environmental protection and political education are an important part of our journalism too. For instance, at the outset of last year's presidential elections, we called on our listeners to vote and transmitted interviews with representatives from the different parties. The exact list of topics we report on was compiled by participatory rural appraisal (PRA): We went to different villages and asked people what they were interested in.

You still present your ideas for agricultural techniques on the radio. Do people believe in you?
They do because I don't just give recommendations on air. I also continue to give hands-on workshops. And on the radio, I tell them that they can always come to my house and see all the technical devices in action.

How do you finance the FADECO radio station?
It is actually very difficult. No big enterprise wants to buy advertising, because they don't consider Karagwe farmers important customers. And local businesses are often too small to afford advertising.

So our revenues are mostly limited to the fees private people pay to announce weddings or funerals. This is the money I use to pay the journalists. I myself – as the manager of the radio station – don't earn anything. But you know, I don't even need to earn money, because I'm like a saviour to my people. They are grateful and in return they sometimes give me medical treatment or schooling for free.

What do you think, how much can a radio station like FADECO really help people?
Information in general is crucial for development. By presenting ideas from the outside world, media can generate innovation in rural areas. Just imagine: how could people in Karagwe even think about constructing a refrigerator if they've never seen one or even knew such machines exist? In my case, simple advice, like telling people that in order to start a chicken farm they don't need to buy a whole chicken, they just need one egg, has already saved some of them from poverty. But radio won't change overall circumstances here like the lack of capital. We have developed a banana wine, for example. It is easy to produce and to sell, but you need bottles to package it. And since you have to purchase them in bulk, accessing bottles is too expensive for most banana growers.

Eva-Maria Verfürth conducted the interview.

Links:
Watch and listen to Joseph Sekiku giving a tour of his working environment at Fadeco community radio:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QK7ZK80S4Tg

FADECO radio:
http://www.fadeco.org/