

Tuning in to farmers' water needs: Radio broadcasts aid Malawi irrigation efforts

By [Timothy A. Wise](#)

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Several members of the Youth Economic and Social Action group led us across flood plains parched in the bright sun of the dry season in Malawi's southern Chikwawa district. Lloyd, the lanky head of the group, pointed across the hardened dirt, ridges carefully drawn for a regulation soccer field. In a small stand of trees, solar panels sparkled in the afternoon sun.

The group, an arm of an organisation called the Sustainable Development Initiative, was taking us to see the new solar-powered pump they had installed to bring irrigation to community-owned lands. With climate change bringing erratic rains, shorter growing seasons, and, last year, devastating drought to southern Africa, irrigation can be a lifeline, literally, for farm families dependent on their next harvest for food.

Augustine Mulomole, from [Farm Radio Trust](#) in the capital of Lilongwe, brought me to Chikwawa, not only to see the range of irrigation projects underway there but also to see Farm Radio Trust's work organising farmer "listening groups" and developing local radio broadcasts on agricultural development issues in the area. The shows link local farmers to government extension officers to promote social accountability for the many agricultural development projects underway in the region. In fact, radio connected the youth group to its irrigation pump.



Water flows from the new solar pump installed by the Youth Economic and Social Action group in Chikwawa, Malawi (Image Supplied)

Radio as two-way communications

Farm Radio Trust (FRT) broadcasts a weekly show nationally via Zodiak Broadcasting Station, one of the largest commercial radio stations in Malawi. FRT has also engaged two local community radio stations, Gaka and Nyathepa, with programming in local languages and produced by local people. Augustine says the programmes reach a wide audience. It is hard to estimate listeners in Malawi, but radio is very popular, particularly in the countryside. Zodiak estimates that the shows could easily have more than one million listeners in this country of 17 million.

FRT works closely with what Mulomole referred to as the “rights-holders,” or the farmers and community members, and the “duty-bearers,” or the government officials charged with providing services, particularly agricultural extension services. “We do not want the government to be afraid of us,” Mulomole said with a smile. FRT works closely with extension offices, offering to use their listening groups and other cell phone-based interventions to help extension workers provide the kind of information farmers need.

Mulomole, a journalist by training, explained that in Malawi, as in much of Africa, extension services are terribly underfunded and understaffed. Each extension officer is given a huge caseload—3,000 instead of the recommended 750 farmers—a broad geographic area to cover, and no funds to cover it. “Even if they have motorcycles for transportation,” Mulomole explained, “they have little budget for fuel. So they can’t easily get to communities, and when they do, they can’t stay there because there is no proper housing for them and no budget for lodging.”

To date, FRT has organized 40 “listening hubs” in villages around the southern towns of Chikwawa and Nsanje. Both were hard-hit by the floods that wiped out crops in the south in 2015 when FRT stepped in with its innovative approach.

The technology is quite simple. FRT supplies each community with a battery-powered radio and a solar panel to charge it. The battery can also be charged with a hand crank, which is critical since much of rural Malawi is still off the electrical grid. They then organise groups of farmers to gather each week to listen and discuss the issues raised on the programme. Farmers can then call in on an open line to ask questions or complain about services. Farmers’ questions and complaints become the basis for direct outreach to responsible officials to address the problems.

Mulomole said it can be something as small as a technical question about planting densities. And it can be as big as a demand for deeper community consultation on one of the large-scale irrigation projects underway in the Lower Shire River area. The call-in feature has been so popular that FRT hired extension workers to answer a free hotline for farmers to call with farming questions - the first-ever farmers’ hotline in Malawi. Mulomole said the line gets several hundred calls per day. “It has proven very, very popular,” he says with some pride.

Hot topics

One of the more interesting forays into social accountability is the organisation of “engagement sessions,” taped for broadcast. These involve about 40 people, half farmers and half “duty-bearers,” from local extension workers to irrigation programme managers. Mulomole said some get very heated, but the officials have come to trust FRT, and they seem to truly appreciate the greater input from the community.

And the communities certainly see the benefits. They get regular weather updates for their local areas every week, critical in southern Africa’s changing climate with its uncertain rains. Many argue that the 2015 floods would not have been nearly as damaging to farmers if they had had early warnings of the coming deluge.

The hot topic in the last few months has been Fall armyworms. This species is new to the region, thought to have arrived from Brazil. It devours almost any crop in its path, particularly Malawi’s staple food crop, maize. Ruth Mwenye, the former Agricultural Extension and Development Coordinator (AEDC) for Mitole Extension Planning Area in Chikwawa, told us the Fall armyworm this year “was like a bomb, everyone was unaware until it was too late.”

FRT has been broadcasting the latest research on how to prevent an infestation and save one's crops. Early-maturing varieties seem to do better, farmers are told. Scouting for early signs of the pests is critical. Remedies range from using specific pesticides to putting sand or soil into the top of the plant before tasseling, which prevents the worm from digging down into the stalk of the maize plant.

Monitoring large-scale irrigation projects

Farm Radio Trust will also play a role in the new irrigation projects being developed along the Shire River. Mwenye told us about the World Bank's Shire Valley Transformation Project, which is launching a major irrigation canal through the region. With year-round sun but only one rainy season, climate change has made that one cropping season very undependable. Irrigation becomes a key strategy for climate adaptation. In the dry season, it can give farmers a second and even a third crop. In a drought, it can save the rainy-season crops with timely irrigation.

Mwenye was emphatic about the importance of such projects. "When these are in operation, it will transform the lives of the farmers," she told us.

FRT is in a number of the communities that stand to benefit from the project, and the social accountability and basic information it provides for farmers will be critical to keeping the projects on track, serving the small-scale farmers they are intended to support. Chris Sande, a Zodiak Radio reporter who works with FRT, covered the World Bank delegation to the Kapichira Dam, which will supply water to the canals. He said the community consultations, partly via radio, had helped avoid damaging oversights, such as routing the canal through a community's graveyard.

The radio project will also monitor an innovative project funded by the [Global Agriculture and Food Security Program](#): a multi-donor fund with a commitment to promoting smallholder food production, gender equity, crop diversity, and local processing and marketing through farmer cooperatives. The [Smallholder Irrigation and Value-Addition Project](#) (SIVAP) has rehabilitated old irrigation systems, installed new ones, trained farmers, and helped them find markets for their rice, pigeon peas, and other food crops. We saw the new building that will become the Chikwawa farmer-owned rice mill and processing facility.

Small is beautiful

As important as those larger projects are, Mulomole seemed proudest of the youth group's irrigation pump, which he hadn't seen yet. A member of the youth group is in one of the listening hubs, which prompted the group to pursue the irrigation.

We reached the fenced area that secures the well, the solar panels shining above the switch for the pump. Lloyd pointed to the outlet 100 feet away at the edge of farm fields, a flexible pipe popping up out of a freshly covered trench. He flipped the switch. Water flowed clean and strong.

The group plans to start a community garden on the 12 acres of land the system can irrigate to grow onions, tomatoes, maize, and other vegetables to sell on the dry-season market. Produce is limited then, with most land idle, so prices are good.

"We expect all 11 villages around this irrigation scheme to take turns in producing food for their communities each growing season," said another beaming group member. "With irrigation, we will be growing crops three times in a year."

Lloyd said they also plan to keep listening each week - and calling in - to Farm Radio Trust.

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