

# “We know that radio is changing lives”

## Farmers want information they can really use

Farm advice straight to your ear in your favorite language? Sounds a good idea. But how is our radio extension initiative\* now doing? The Foundation’s representative recently went round Mount Kenya to find out. We asked him for the fuller story.

*Syngenta Foundation: What is the idea behind working with radio stations?*

**Paul Castle:** Information! Smallholders and agricultural officials kept telling me: What is really missing in Kenyan farming is good information. Radio is a great way to get up-to-date knowledge to lots of people at very low cost.

*But isn’t access to technology the much bigger issue?*

It depends how you look at it. Sure, millions of smallholders worldwide can’t get all the technology that would raise their yields. But at least the technology often exists, and numerous organizations are



helping farmers to access it – including our [Seeds2B](#) team, for example. But technology on its own is not enough. Farmers need to know what could potentially help them, where to get it, and how best to use it. And this last aspect – proper use – needs frequent refreshers. So information really is the key.

*The Syngenta Foundation promotes access to new IT tools and varieties from highly sophisticated breeding. Isn’t it a contradiction to support info via radio, which is so “low-tech”?*

The question our partners and we always ask is: What does the job best? Breeding new traits into a variety requires excellent science. But “lower tech” doesn’t always mean “worse”. Radio has numerous advantages over other media.

*Like what?*

Radio is very democratic. It is much cheaper to produce and receive than TV. It avoids challenges of internet access. Radio also reaches far more people than an agricultural extension officer can visit personally, particularly in remote areas. Listeners can learn a lot even if they can’t read well. And if the programs are properly planned, they benefit men and women of all ages.

*What do you mean by “properly planned”?*

There are several aspects here. One is timing: most radio stations we work with now broadcast their farm info in the evening. Women and men can listen better then than during the day in the fields. Our partners at [Kilimo Media](#) (KiMI) also put a lot of emphasis on suitable content: the stations and extension officers plan together how best to serve male and female information needs. The programs provide a good mix of topics – for example on cattle vaccinations one week, and poultry-raising the next. Cows tend to interest Kenyan men more; chickens are usually a female responsibility.



*But think of your own listening habits. Isn’t radio just “in one ear and out the other”?*

That's true of hip-hop in the car, yes. But the smallholders I met in Kenya this time, like all I've heard from in the past, have a huge appetite for information! They are an avid and attentive audience. But importantly, our initiative goes further than just passive listening. The stations often run call-ins during the programs, and lots of farmers use that opportunity. Most extension officers also announce their mobile numbers on air, and then get follow-up calls from smallholders they have never been able to see. Farmers we visited had specially requested meetings, and shook their officers' hands for the first time ever. KiMI also urges the creation of listener groups, who meet the extension officer after a program to go through the content in detail and ask further questions.

*Worldwide, there are lots of initiatives using radio to spread health messages, calls for peace or tips on better crops. But unlike many organizations, the Foundation stresses the use of very local languages. Doesn't that rather limit your impact?*

Quite the reverse! Superficially, it might seem wiser to concentrate on a country's majority language. But impact isn't about theoretically "reaching" a wide area so you can put a big "Contacts" figure in an Excel sheet. A lot of agricultural extension is change management – helping people to replace their grandparents' practices. That process involves both "head" and "heart". And although you can reach the head with a national school language like Kiswahili, it's the village vernacular that touches hearts. On my recent visit, smallholders again told me how much they value getting information in the language they use when talking about plants, animals and food.



*That sounds emotionally right. But what evidence have you got that farmers actually implement any radio advice?*

This time, I visited Rware FM and Thirii FM\*\*. Nobody claims that every listener around Meru or Nyeri immediately earns more after every program. But smallholders are very quick to tell extension officers if their advice was useful or not! Another key part of the programs is hearing other farmers' tips – see our photos here of recorded interviews. As

most Kenyan farmers have mobile phones, the officers are well-informed about who is implementing what. From that, we know that large numbers of listeners pick up on particular items. Those can be relatively specific points like planting-distances or udder-washing. But numerous farmers have started whole new businesses thanks to hearing radio advice and calling for further details. As KiMI's Pamela Mburia said to me: "We know that radio is changing lives".

*What are your main challenges?*

One recurring hurdle is something I'd underestimated in advance. It's actually a compliment, and the price of doing a good job: The radio employees whom KiMI trains often get "poached" by competitors. If they introduce farm radio at their next stations, that's great. But for KiMI, it means frequent new training sessions over a wide geographical area.

A constant issue in our discussions with County agricultural administrators is budget allocation. They all see radio's excellent value for money, and support the use of extension officers' hours to work with the stations. But when central government delays local funding, and a hundred potential recipients seek budget for schools, roads, clinics or whatever, it's hard for administrators to commit money longer-term to farm radio. KiMI keeps pushing...

### *What does the future hold?*

We're now in the middle of a three-year cycle with our second group of stations. An important focus in the coming months will be on helping the stations earn money from their farm radio. That's particularly important in the light of County funding challenge. To make agricultural broadcasts a sustainable part of stations' programming, they need to bring in related new advertising revenue, for example. That doesn't just happen: It needs training and careful planning.

For me personally, a major activity will be planning how to scale up our radio work further. So far, we've concentrated on Kenya. What should be our next steps? Kenya still has lots of other vernacular stations with thousands of farmer listeners who haven't yet benefited. But that is also true of some other countries in which the Foundation works. Information is in short supply all over the world!

\* <https://www.syngentafoundation.org/agriservices/whatwedo/radioextension>

\*\*See their Twitter pages @Thiirifmkenya and @1017fm