

Canadian farm radio pioneer honoured

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George Atkins was sitting on a bus in Africa 30 years ago when he asked a couple of questions that would change his life.

Mr. Atkins, who was a farm commentator for the CBC and was attending workshops for Third World broadcasters, found himself seated between commentators from Nigeria and Sierra Leone. He asked them what they told their listeners in a typical broadcast.

One said he would inform his audience about the latest developments in fertilizers and pesticides. The other said he would talk about things such as how to replace a sparkplug on a tractor.

"So then I asked him how many people in his country owned tractors," Mr. Atkins, 87, said last week from his home in Hepworth, Ont. "He said about one in 80,000. And he said his program reached about 800,000 people. So I said, 'You're talking to 10 people.'"

Mr. Atkins spent the rest of the bus ride talking about how the African radio men would better serve their countrymen if they provided information useful to poor farmers with rudimentary equipment. How to train and breed oxen; how to create and use compost.

The Nigerian and the Sierra Leonean said they would certainly broadcast such information, if only they had it.

And so, the seeds were sown for what would become the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (DCFRN), an organization that provided its first radio scripts to Third World broadcasters in 1979 and now works with 500 of them -- many still using the scripts Mr. Atkins researched and wrote in the '70s -- in 75 countries.

Mr. Atkins is being honoured by the Canadian Bureau for International Education in Ottawa today for his contribution to international development as DCFRN's founder.

The Canadian Bureau for International Education, a non-governmental organization governed chiefly by executives from universities and colleges across the country, is today giving Mr. Atkins the Lewis Perinbaum Award in International Development.

"It's an honour, of course," Mr. Atkins said. "But it shouldn't go just to me. I've had a lot of help from a lot of people."