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Gates group explores farm radio

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Illustrations: Photo: Aminata Toure Photo / Radio Djitoumou in Quelessbougou, Mali, sends agricultural information to small farmers in the African countryside. The Gates foundation is helping fund research by an Ottawa group that does this kind of broadcasting.

One wouldn't think that the fabulously rich Gates foundation would be interested in anything that goes on in Mechanicsville.

It's a dark and grubby old Ottawa neighbourhood, barely within sight of the deep carpets and gala fundraisers of the parliamentary precinct.

The unglamorous community, though, is an oddly appropriate place to begin what could be a big development push for Africa. It'll be based on tested methods, established technologies and small egos.

At the launch party on the edge of Mechanicsville for what everyone was calling "the Gates initiative," the development workers were holding wine glasses at dangerous angles as they excitedly grabbed each others' sport-coated elbows. They all looked slightly dazed, like Cinderella at the ball.

Doug Ward, a CBC radio veteran, is the president of the board of the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network. He describes it as a "tiny little NGO." At the launch party for its new partnership with Bill Gates and company, Mr. Ward looked more like Cinderella than anyone.

The network was founded by George Atkins, a farm commentator for CBC back in the days when farm radio was an important part of the Canadian media.

Mr. Atkins was travelling in Zambia in 1975, when he discovered that farm radio in Africa tended to focus on expensive chemicals and machinery -- the kinds of information governments thought of as modern, but that left small, poor farmers bemused.

So Mr. Atkins came back to Canada and created the network, as a way to get practical information to the people in Africa who need it. It's still thriving, as a distribution centre for radio scripts and agricultural information.

"People in rural Africa just devour it," says Mr. Ward.

But there's very little data about how, or whether, access to agricultural radio actually improves food security in poor African countries.

"We can't afford to do research at the farm gate," Mr. Ward explains.

Bill Gates can. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is known for its work in the field of health care in Africa. It takes an entrepreneurial

approach: find out what works, then scale it up as big as it can go.

There's a lot of talk these days about the need for a "Green Revolution" in Africa. It's a phrase that Doug Ward, with his respect for small farms and time-honoured methods, views with some skepticism, because he feels it can be code for something imposed and inappropriate. But he does like the idea of using the wisdom and experience of farmers to find ways around the obstacles that keep products from getting to market, or keep farmers from working as efficiently as they might.

"Clearly, Africa could do a whole lot better if the best ideas of African farmers could be shared and mobilized," he says.

The Gates foundation thinks so too. It has people who are out there looking for the partners who can help them help Africa. And so, the Gates foundation came knocking on the door of a little Canadian NGO with four staff. It wants the network to design and implement a research program to discover what works in African farm radio.

It took a year of what Mr. Ward calls "courtship," in which each side took the measure of the other. The Gates foundation eventually chose to give the grant through the farm-radio network's much larger partner, World University Service Canada, whose office on Scott Street is also the new home of the farm-radio network.

For the next three-and-a-half years, the network and its partners in Canada and Africa will design and implement the research project in Ghana, Mali, Malawi, Uganda and Tanzania. It began last week, when the network brought several African partners to a Wakefield inn for a planning conference.

"This initiative is unique," says Mary Shetto, of the Tanzanian national advisory committee. "We have been communicating by radio for many years, but we've never looked at how to improve the medium and make it more effective." That means making radio more interactive, with the use of cellphones, for example.

"Radio is the tool you find almost everywhere," says Martine Ngobo, the project's senior research manager based in Ghana. "It is the most accessible source of information for small scale farmers. So it is a good starting point."

A small Ottawa-based organization, with a budget of

about half a million dollars a year, is now the central part of a project that will spend \$4 million U.S. over 42 months.

Mr. Ward's job is to make sure that the simple radio network that George Atkins established emerges from its brush with wealth unscathed. "We have to stick to our knitting," he says. "It's like a dream come true for us. Now all we have to do is deliver and we're scared out of our minds."

Still, he can't help but be excited that the network will have access to information it can use to do a better job. And it will be a part of something much bigger than itself.

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