

Building strong ties

Canadians help Africans by radio

by Doug Ward

Do you know there have been strong ties between rural Canadians and rural Africans for more than three decades?

In 1975, CBC farm broadcaster George Atkins attended a Commonwealth meeting in Zambia. On a bumpy bus ride through the Zambian countryside, he asked a colleague from Sierra Leone about his next broadcast.

"I'm going to tell the farmers how to change the sparkplugs on their tractors," was the reply. Atkins was puzzled.

"What proportion of farmers have tractors?" he asked.

"Oh, about one in 80,000," the broadcaster answered.

"Do you also talk about the care and feeding of the oxen that the other 79,000-plus use for plowing?" Atkins continued.

"We don't have that kind of information. The government wants to highlight modern farming methods," was the reply.

This disconnect between government bureaucrats and small farmers who needed no-cost or low-cost solutions to their farming challenges stuck with Atkins, and when he retired in 1979, he started Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (DCFRN), a tiny Canadian organization that now helps African farmers and African food scientists share traditional and modern farm practices over the radio.

Radio was chosen because it was a simple, relatively inexpensive medium, and the only one accessible to hundreds of millions of African small farmers, both women and men, in their own languages.

DCFRN gathers the best African farming information—traditional and modern—and rewrites it into clear, simple-language radio scripts. Packages of the scripts are mailed to hundreds of rural African radio stations. There, broadcasters adapt the scripts and broadcast them in local dialects. Sometimes they also take the background research provided and create a series of programs involving farmers and agriculture extension

workers.

Funds for DCFRN come from individual Canadian donors, many of whom live in rural areas, and some who can remember hearing George Atkins sign off his Radio Noon agriculture reports with his distinctive, "this is George Atkins, serving agriculture, the basic industry." The Canadian government also respects DCFRN's work and matches every dollar raised from the public.

SHARING INFORMATION

For more than 30 years, packages of DCFRN scripts have covered a myriad of topics. Early ones dealt with relatively simple subjects such as avoiding soil erosion on hillsides by planting across the hill,



Radio DCFRN gathers the best African farming information for presentation in clear, simple-language radio scripts. (Chris Gill illustration)

not up and down. Last year DCFRN commissioned a 13-part radio drama that dealt with holding back the spread of desert. The message was framed in typical soap opera fashion, with bad guys, good guys, and those in the middle trying to sort things out, just like the farmers. Other recent scripts have run the gamut from raising rabbits for meat and profit to growing legumes for food and fertilizer.

Today, radio remains the most important way to share rural information. And recent developments have made radio even more useful. Now millions of women farmers have their own tiny transistor radios, and

can listen to programs produced for them, even when their husbands control the radio in the home. In addition, new, low-power, rural radio stations are being built in many rural regions of Africa. And cheap mobile phone systems are popping up like mushrooms all across Africa. Farmers can now phone in and ask for advice over the air.

DCFRN is adapting with the times. Thirty years ago, all scripts were written by Canadian writers, albeit using African sources. Today scripts are written by African partners. And while paper scripts are still mailed out to all broadcasters, this fall DCFRN will launch a weekly email newsletter for broadcasters who have access to the Internet—and their numbers grow daily. DCFRN is also putting together plans and resources to provide training for rural broadcasters, something their own cash-strapped stations and governments can't provide.

And some things never change. Atkins based his work on listening to the farmers, and DCFRN remains convinced that Africans are the best people to solve the challenges facing African agriculture, when their voices can be heard over those of Western experts who have been offering quick fixes for decades.

As for Atkins, he celebrated his 90th birthday on July 1, sharing the day with wife Janet, surrounded by children and grandchildren. They've recently moved to a retirement home in Warton, Ontario, having finally given up the family farm.

Atkins remains plugged in to DCFRN and watches it refine and extend its work with enthusiasm. And as Founding Director, he is always ready with advice for the board and staff by telephone, whenever they need to be reminded of the lessons of that bumpy bus ride in Zambia in 1975.

(Doug Ward is chair of the DCFRN board. For more information about DCFRN, follow the Country Magazines link to find *Rural Delivery* at www.AtlanticFarmer.com.)

