

In The News

Media Release

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Canadian organization celebrates thirty years Helping millions of African farmers over the airwaves

Ottawa, Ontario, May 1, 2009 — Cayenne pepper to discourage elephants from grazing on farm fields. Placing a lit candle in a container of grain before sealing it to deprive pests of oxygen. Organizing a community to clean up its water supply.

When Canadian journalist George Atkins first visited Africa in the 1970s, he found that Africa's farmers weren't short of good ideas appropriate to their circumstances, but distance, language and limited literacy often prevented them from sharing these ideas with each other.

Instead, the ideas being shared were those from the developed economies — the result of farm extension efforts aimed at Africa which tended to focus on using inappropriate or unaffordable machinery, chemicals or fertilizer.

Atkins, a farm broadcaster at CBC Toronto, had been part of the success in delivering practical extension information to farmers in post-war Canada. When he returned from his visit to Africa, he resolved to launch a second career doing the same for farmers in Africa in a way that would solve the idea-sharing problem. The Developing Countries Farm Radio Network was born in a small office in Toronto.

On May 1, 1979 the first script package was sent. Today, 884 radio scripts later, and with the new name of Farm Radio International, Atkins' brainchild celebrates its 30th anniversary of successfully reaching farmers through what remains the cheapest and most reliable medium in the developing world — radio.

Now based in Ottawa with a staff of 10, Farm Radio produces scripts about farming and rural development for more than 300 stations in Africa.

One partner, Umar Baba Kumo of Gombe Media Corporation in Nigeria, says he broadcasts FRI script content to about a million listeners.

“The scripts are relevant, simple and easy to adapt to local languages and settings. Text messages from listeners indicate overwhelming support. A script on food/grains storage using pepper instead of chemical pesticides was particularly helpful.”

Thanks to continuing support from Canadian donors, Farm Radio has been able to expand its programs through a weekly e-newsletter, and it is now conducting a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation-funded African Farm Radio Research Initiative in five countries to discover the best ways to use radio to support smallholder farmers.

Atkins, now 91, who stepped down from the Farm Radio board only two years ago, says “at this time, millions of the poorest of the poor farmers of the world are hearing this information to help them increase their food supplies and have better nutrition and health. If that isn’t what’s helping people in developing countries, I don’t know what is. I have to pinch myself when I think of the people who are helped by this service that is available to them by just turning on their radio.”

Atkins said he hopes Canadians will continue their generous donations to support the low-cost but effective approach he started 30 years ago, noting that the world food shortages of the past year have reinforced the importance of supporting smallholder farmers around the world.

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