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Africa on the air

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Eastern Limits

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I discovered it on my last foray though Canada's Outdoor **Farm** Show last week, just before I was to climb on the coach for the long drive back to the wilds of Eastern Ontario. Except for a Pickering pit stop at what proved to be one of the most glorious buffets I've ever had the pleasure to ransack, our two-day trip to the other end of the province was over. **Farm** Show owner-operator Lorie Jocius was about to use the bus microphone to bid us a final adieu.

I had about 20 minutes so I headed to the far west side of the Woodstock show grounds to see what I could see. Beyond the acres of equipment and demonstrations, lined up alongside Canadian Foodgrains Bank and Woodstock Rotary Club, was the **Farm Radio International** (FRI) booth, a modest set-up Lorie welcomed in for the first time this year. It was partly as a tribute to her late husband, **Farm** Show founder Ginty Jocius, a big supporter of this Third World service founded 30 years ago by retired agricultural **radio** broadcaster George Atkins, now 92, who stepped down a few years ago. George was a mentor to Ginty who repaid the favour over the years.

It occurred to me I didn't know very much about the service, so I stepped inside the tent to encounter highly animated "public engagement officer" Brenda Jackson, part of a 10-member staff based in Ottawa. It being the 30th anniversary of FRI, Brenda revealed that the agency supported by CIDA and by public donations is trying to raise its profile in its homeland, thus its presence at the **Farm** Show.

Operating in Africa, scripts prepared here designed to help subsistence farmers are aired over more than 300 **radio** stations. It all started after Atkins, upon first visiting Africa in the 1970s, discovered that existing **farm radio** was aimed at large commercial **farms** and plantations. Programs were about machinery and fertilizers irrelevant to small stakeholders. Specifically tailored programs for those limited by circumstances, distance, language and illiteracy seemed like the best method of delivering tips on everything from discouraging elephants grazing in **farm** fields (cayenne pepper) to depriving pests in a sealed container

of oxygen (a candle). Broad topics range from livestock health to adapting to climate change. George created what was first known as Developing Countries **Farm Radio** Network and, May 1, 1979, the first package of scripts was shipped. Some 900 scripts later, **Farm Radio International** continues to reach developing world farmers through its cheapest, most reliable medium.

These days, some service partners such as Trans World **Radio**- Kenya are able to access scripts on the Internet to support programming on six stations broadcasting up to six hours of original content every day. Trans World programs manager David Angango calls FRI a must-have resource for those who work in rural **radio** in Africa.

It does much more than just ship scripts. It's on the ground in Africa, working hard at maximizing the benefit of its service through such efforts as sponsoring a workshop in Ghana on gender equality and its links to poverty eradication which drew 19 broadcasters from 10 stations. It seems that, although a large majority of **farming** is undertaken by females in Africa, **radio** programming has traditionally been less accessible to rural women than to men. Broadcasters have not always understood the listening needs, habits and priorities of female farmers.

With a deadline of Nov. 1, the Canadian service is also co-sponsoring a **radio** scriptwriting competition in English or French on the topic of smallholder farmer innovation, backed by a free online course on writing **radio** scripts.

FRI's efforts have, along the way, earned it important moral and financial endorsements from the likes of former federal cabinet minister Flora McDonald and from Canadian broadcasting icon Lloyd Robertson who congratulated the service for combining three of his passions... journalism, broadcasting and "giving something back". Donations aren't just welcome from Flora and Lloyd. They can even be made on-line at www.farmradio.org. George and Ginty would appreciate it.