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## Farming better in Uganda — with Canadian help

An organization founded by a CBC broadcaster now helps millions of farmers in 38 countries in Africa

By Anne Cote

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KAMPALA, UGANDA

Uganda has some of the most fertile land on Earth and is home to thousands of smallholder farmers who feed the country relying on just two basic tools — a machete and a hoe.

In some ways their situation is similar to that of Prairie homesteaders early in the last century, who also relied on hand tools and animal power. But, thanks to the work of a Canadian organization, Ugandan farmers have an advantage over the Prairie pioneers — an opportunity to learn better farming techniques through the medium of radio.

Farm Radio International (FRI) was founded in 1979 by CBC farm broadcaster George Atkins. While on a tour in Africa, he discovered broadcasters were providing information on topics such as how to replace spark plugs on tractors — good information if you own a tractor, which most Ugandan farmers don't. When Atkins returned to Canada he started preparing scripts that contained information relevant to the challenges and problems faced by African smallholder farmers.

FRI senior consultant David Mowbray manages communications and training programs. He said that because Ugandan radio agriculture programming in the 1970s was so out of touch with smallholder farmers, they stopped listening and clung to the practices and myths handed down through the generations.

Atkins developed a "participatory" format — interview local farmers about the topic, back up their stories with expert knowledge, then facilitate a dialogue between the on-air people and the listeners.

Mowbray said the format still works today.

"We tell real stories... that's a winning formula all over the world," he said. "We know farmers need to hear from a farmer they trust." In Uganda that's farmers who work the soil with a hoe and harvest the crop with a machete, he added.

### Training the trainers

Today FRI has 500 radio station partners in 38 African countries, and while it continues to provide regular scripts on improved farming practices, it's working with African broadcasters to train them on how to provide relevant radio programming for farmers.

Askebir Gebru, country director at the FRI Uganda office, explained the approach over a cup of tea at a Kampala hotel.

"We train trainers, we don't hire them," he said. In Uganda FRI has provided training to 10 radio stations which broadcast in six languages in 13 districts, Gebru said.

### Women farmers

In a good year, Ugandan farmers can feed their immediate family and have some produce left over to sell to middlemen who travel the main roads buying food for the city markets. This money goes to provide clothing, medical care and an education for the children. The Ugandan government does not supply medical care and public school opportunities are limited.



Every month each of the 30 women in the Del Agro group put money into a pot. They draw a name and present the winner, who can use it to invest in an improvement on her own farm, to pay school fees or help another woman start a business of her own. The money is hers to distribute, or invest, wherever she wants and it's not repayable. PHOTOS: ANNE COTE



Members of the Zibulatudde Katente farmers' group meet every Sunday to listen to a farm radio broadcast.

A trip to a local farmers' group demonstrated how the FRI radio programming format impacts their lives.

It took almost an hour to travel the washed-out roads to the 10-acre farm owned by Agness Kalya, chair of the Zibulatudde Katente farmers' group, about 30 kms from dusty downtown Kampala. The group is made up mainly of women working on small farms. Mowbray said women provide 60 per cent of the agricultural labour in Uganda.

Kalya is responsible for recording the weekly agriculture broadcast on a portable radio supplied by FRI to share with the group when they meet on Sunday. Then she facilitates a group discussion about the week's topic.

Paschal Mweruka from the Ugandan office of FRI, the guide and interpreter for the day, said the Katente group is particularly active in promoting crops that improve family health and increase farm income.

In October, eight women in the Katente group were guests on a local radio program. They performed a song they wrote to promote the health benefits of orange-fleshed sweet potatoes (OSP) and how to grow them.

OSP is rich in vitamin A and grows well in the local soil. A single vine clipping, something else Kalya and the other women sell at market, can produce up to 12 kilograms of OSP. That's 24 to 36 kg of nutrition per year in just one hill of

potatoes. That goes a long way towards feeding the 14 people that make up Kalya's family.

Mweruka said it wasn't easy to convince local male farmers to grow the vitamin-rich crop, despite evidence that vitamin A deficiency causes blindness and contributes to early childhood deaths. The myth that OSP caused sterility in men was deeply embedded in the local culture, which reveres large families. So how did the women, in a male-dominated culture, change the men's attitude?

Mweruka said radio played an important role. The local station, a recipient of FRI training, developed a program to dispel the myth. They invited a farmer who grows and eats OSP and had fathered several children to talk about the financial success of the crop. They invited a medical doctor to talk about the benefits of vitamin A and provide scientific evidence that OSP did not cause sterility or impotence. Then they opened up the phone lines so listeners could ask questions.

The women in the Katente group said as they learn more about farming through the radio broadcasts and gain peer support, they feel empowered. They believe they can talk knowledgeably about the OSP crop and teach other farmers how to grow it.

## Cheap, simple and effective

The brightly coloured wind-up battery radios FRI provides to farmer groups have a number of practical features:

- Inexpensive at \$54 each;
- Simple to operate;
- Small, lightweight and easy to store;
- Wind-up lever for charging;
- Solar panel for charging;
- A cellphone charging station which means farmers without electricity don't have to travel kilometres to recharge their phones;
- A recording chip for playback enabling groups to meet at a convenient time rather than the live broadcast time and to replay the information if they choose to;
- A simple wire antenna long enough to be strung across a road or to the top of a tree to pick up radio signals.



One of FRI's campaigns promotes the planting of orange-fleshed sweet potato, which is high in vitamin A. A single vine clipping can produce up to 12 kilograms.

Kalya said she's planning to clear another part of an acre next year to plant more OSP. She's calculated that effort will provide 500,000 Ugandan shillings (C\$210) in revenue over the year and after input costs she'll be left with 250,000 shillings, an amount equal to the salary of a local preschool teacher.

A visit to a second group, Del Agro Business Enterprises Limited, showed how the women are embracing farming as a business, not just a means to feed their family. They've developed an agro-tourism site with a hostel to increase their income and fund community development.

Anne Cote is a Winnipeg freelance journalist who last fall took part in the Exposure-4-Development tour organized by International Federation of Agriculture Journalists and Dutch-based Agriterra.