

How radio is helping Ethiopian farmers deal with drought

Ethiopia is facing its worst drought in 50 years, strengthened by an especially intense El Niño occurrence. Unpredictable and heavy rainfall is now threatening what crops and livestock remain after months of drought.

Farmers in some of the most drought-stricken communities in Ethiopia are learning how to protect what they have left through a remarkably simple yet effective tool: the radio. Canadian NGO Farm Radio International (FRI) is working with broadcasters in several regions to help farmers cope with drought and prepare for the next growing season.

The situation

Ethiopia is very vulnerable to drought, and is home to the greatest number of people needing assistance. About 80 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, where most people support themselves through rain-fed, subsistence agriculture. Without rain, many of their crops have failed and their livestock are weak, dying or dead. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 10 million Ethiopians, almost one tenth of the population, are currently in need of food aid. Meanwhile, only about half of the target of 1.4 billion USD in humanitarian assistance has been raised, and some food aid remains tied up in congested ports.

How radio is helping

Inexpensive and widely accessible, radio reaches the largest audience worldwide in the shortest possible time. And it is the medium of choice for farmers, who depend on it for life-changing information on how to grow more and better food.

FRI works with radio partners across Africa to help broadcasters better serve small-scale farmers and their families. One of its regional offices is in Ethiopia, where local staff members provide ongoing support to partner stations and oversee specific development projects.

Before the drought, the FRI Ethiopia team developed a radio program on sorghum for the Tigray Region, following in-depth consultations with local partners and farmers. However, as the program aired and drought conditions set in, it became increasingly apparent that the carefully planned radio program was not in alignment with the new reality facing farmers.

In Tigray and elsewhere, radio programs are being overhauled to meet farmers' new needs. Learning about water conservation is of no interest or use to farmers in a drought situation. The focus has shifted from topics such as micro-irrigation, bee-hiving and marketing to when to harvest to save crops from heavy rains, preserving livestock by feeding them failed crops, and the importance of prioritizing nutrition for pregnant women and nursing mothers.

While food aid is certainly a very important component of the response to the drought in Ethiopia and elsewhere on the continent, it is not the only one. Radio is and will be key in helping farmers to minimize the impact of the drought and avoid further losses.

Contact information

If you are interested in this media opportunity, please contact FRI's Communications Coordinator, Katie Burnham. She would be happy to connect you with Ethiopian field staff, including Ms. Freyhiwot Nadew, a trained journalist who heads up FRI's operations in the country, and broadcasters who can be interviewed to explore the role of radio in helping farmers deal with drought.

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About Farm Radio International

Farm Radio International is a Canadian charity that works with more than 600 radio partners across 39 African countries to fight poverty and food insecurity. It helps African broadcasters meet the needs of small-scale farmers and their families in rural communities by providing program research and content and broadcasting training to develop a higher standard of farm radio services. It also works with African radio stations on impact projects that address specific development challenges. Farm Radio International has received numerous awards recognizing its innovative use of radio with other information and communication technologies. For more information please visit www.farmradio.org.