



BROADCASTING DEVELOPMENT

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RADIO IS PROVING AN ESSENTIAL TOOL IN IMPROVING THE LIVES OF COFFEE FARMERS IN EAST AFRICA.

While working as a coffee trader more than a decade ago, Peter Kettler heard a story that disturbed him.

Farmers in Ethiopia were being cheated by buyers on the ground, who were tricking the farmers into selling for much lower than they should have been as they had no access to information about the international prices being paid for their crops.

“In a world where we are so connected and information moves so freely, it was just ridiculous that they could get away with that,” Kettler says now.

It was around that time that Kettler became aware of an organisation in South Africa called the Free Play Foundation, which was distributing solar and crank powered radios to communities as a way of improving communications and empowering people on the ground.

These two pieces of information spurred Kettler into action, and in 2004 he set about raising the money to buy some of these radios for coffee farmers in Rwanda.

His first foray into the field saw him taking 100 of these radios to Rwanda, which he then distributed to farming communities. Once there, Kettler helped to organise listening groups of 20–30 farmers in each area. While one farmer was appointed as the guardian of the radio, the whole group would come together regularly to listen to it, ensuring the resource was utilised as effectively as possible.

However, after completing that project, Kettler was not confident that the job was done.

“I felt that we had provided them with the hardware that they needed to get better information, but the information that they



Peter Kettler now produces the programming to complement the radios that are being delivered to farming communities in East Africa.

needed still was not being delivered, so that was what we needed to work on,” he says.

Kettler connected with a community radio organisation in Rwanda and put together a group of journalists to develop a regular program that would provide farmers with the information they need.

From the very beginning, Kettler says he knew that this would not work if the program was made up of content determined by himself and others outside of the farming communities. So the journalists went out to the communities they were trying to reach and found out directly from the farmers what information they needed. Thus Coffee Lifeline was born.

While the program does devote plenty of time and attention to farming matters, it also extends well beyond that, with features on health, financial literacy and environmental matters, as well as a children’s story at the end of each show.

“Radio is really something that the whole family comes together to listen to in these areas, so we want to include something in there for everybody, which is really a key to its success,” Kettler says.

Another fundamental approach taken by the program is that, rather than featuring outside experts on the issues being covered, they find stories of farmers in the region who have adopted



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Founder, Coffee Lifeline



The program consists of information that farmers tell the producers they need.



Coffee Lifeline is broadcast weekly to a potential audience of 2.5 million people.



The radios provided to the farming communities can be powered by solar energy or a crank.

successful practices and can talk about their own experiences in how these have improved their farms and livelihoods. This gives the audience real-life, relatable examples of the practices being promoted, ensuring they are suitable for the environment they are being promoted in and making them much more likely to be adopted.

One of the important benefits of radio as a medium for information dissemination is that it is more accessible than written communications and more widely accessible than community forums, which are often dominated by landowners and senior members of the community.

“The problem with a lot of these forums is that much of the information is never spread beyond the people who attend them, whereas a lot of this information really needs to reach the people doing most of the work, which is often the women,” Kettler says.

After almost 10 years working in the field, Kettler has developed a deep appreciation of the needs of the farmers in East Africa, and he feels that while there are plenty of organisations on the ground trying to help, there is a lot of duplication of effort that undermines the effectiveness of their work.

Another piece of the puzzle that Kettler feels is still missing is greater cooperation between business and non-government organisations.

“They have the same aims, but it’s just like they speak different languages. The mindset for businesses needs to shift away from this idea that they are donating to these communities – what they are doing is investing in their industry,” he says. “If you want to improve the quality of the coffee being produced, you have to improve the quality of life of those producing it, the two go hand in hand.”

After all, Kettler says, the future of the industry rests on addressing this challenge.

“The population of coffee farmers is ageing and unless we can show their children that this is an industry that they want to be in, then we are in trouble, because we will just have to rely on those who have no choice but to continue farming, which is kind of like indentured servitude,” he says. **GCR**

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Image taken at Ozone Coffee Roasters

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