Preventing COVID-19 across the radio waves in Malawi

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I have a critical role to raise awareness about the Coronavirus among our listeners, particularly farmers. I tell them ways to prevent it," Gladys Phiri of Farm Radio Trust in Malawi’s capital, Lilongwe. “I also put in practice what I tell my listeners. Even at home and everywhere I go, I practice personal hygiene, regularly washing my hands with soap, observing social distancing and limiting my movements.”

Since the very first cases of Coronavirus were discovered in China at the end of 2019, the Corona virus disease (COVID-19) has unprecedently continued to spread across the world, sparing no continent, almost no country. At the time of writing, Malawi had this far registered 36 COVID-19 cases and 3 deaths.

With safety measures being enforced by government to contain the spread of the virus, people are not allowed to gather in groups exceeding 100 and that they should observe social distancing. Yet, like in any epidemic, the greatest enemy is ignorance. Ignorance begets rumour, misinformation, the spread of fear and, nowadays, fake news is like the main news.

In this context, radio programmes can safely relay COVID-19 prevention messages to people in rural areas with no or limited access to newspapers, television and social media.

Farm Radio Trust - a long-term partner of the World Food Programme in Malawi - uses radio and other channels like a hotline or SMS info service to share weather information and agro-advisories to smallholder farmers. The radio is reaching out over 700,000 listeners and its programmes are picked up by Zodiak Broadcasting Station with a national listener base of 2.9 million.

In the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, WFP continues to partner with Farm Radio Trust to also share awareness messages to rural farmers.

“I source the right information about the pandemic from the authorities like Ministry of Health and use the information to produce appropriate programmes for the farmers,” says John Mpakeni, a producer of programmes at Farm Radio Trust. “I also engage a lot with farmers when I’m in the field collecting radio programme content so I understand well their language. It’s very encouraging to see more and more farmers with handwashing facilities at their homes and at meeting points.”

“Positive messaging in our radio programmes is critical because the virus is preventable. I want listeners to grasp this message and take necessary precautions to stop the spread of COVID-19,” he concludes.

“My role here is to collect market price data from farmers. However, because our radio also speaks about the virus, some farmers take advantage of this to ask about Covid,” says Takondwa Chindiwo, a Call Centre intern at the Trust. “I have the official messages sent by the Ministry of Health, so it is easy to respond to farmers concerns on the COVID-19. One never knows who can be saved through this small gesture,” she concludes.

Malawi has in the recent decades registered an escalation of natural disasters including floods, dry spells, strong winds, disease and pest outbreaks. These disasters have destroyed people’s livelihoods fuelling the vicious cycle of hunger in the process. Now, on top of that, the covid-19 pandemic is threatening millions of people already vulnerable due to food insecurity, malnutrition and climate change and other disasters. World Food Programme (WFP) Executive Director David Beasley has warned that in addition to the threat posed by COVID-19, the world faces “multiple famines of biblical proportions” that could result in 300,000 deaths per day — a “hunger pandemic”.

At global level and in Malawi, WFP is working around the clock to maintain assistance programmes despite the global outbreak and has moved quickly to develop and implement plans to reorganize food distributions, adapting them in order to protect both staff and food assistance programme participants.