Making health messages interesting
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In Afghanistan a radio drama serial carrying messages vital to the well-being of the population, backed up by more detailed information in reinforcing radio programmes and a cartoon magazine, is proving effective in increasing people’s knowledge of immunization and other subjects.

In Afghanistan the health status of women and children is among the lowest in the world. Access to health care, safe water and sanitation is limited, and the adult literacy rate is only about 24%.

Since the mid-1980s, educational items on radio, broadcast by the World Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), have proved beneficial, especially when the soap opera approach was used. However, radio alone was not adequate for conveying specific information, for instance on the preparation of oral rehydration solution. Another drawback was that only limited contributions could be made by communities and technical agencies in Afghanistan because the material was broadcast from London.

Drama

These shortcomings led the BBC to embark on a more ambitious venture, the Afghan Education Drama project, supported technically and financially by Afghanistan’s Ministry of Public Health, the International Committee of the Red Cross, several United Nations programmes, the United Kingdom, and WHO. A radio production centre was set up in Peshawar and in 1993 a project manager was appointed, together with a coordinator and specialists in radio soap operas. The objective was to produce a soap opera, New Home, New Life, in Pashto and Persian three times a week, dealing with a village resettled by refugees.

New Home, New Life explores everyday problems of life in areas such as health, education, and agriculture. The advice of experts in various disciplines is obtained to ensure the correctness of the material imparted. Story lines in the soap opera which carry immunization messages are reinforced by programmes giving details of the areas to be covered, the age groups eligible for immunization, and the diseases against which vaccines are administered. This is important: while an issue is being flagged in the soap opera, more detailed information, which cannot be accommodated in the drama format, is presented in additional broadcasts. The learning process is helped by radio spots, jingles and shorter dramas. Recently, lyric forms of particular episodes of the soap opera have been played with musical accompaniment, and it is hoped that they will be useful teaching aids. The messages of the
drama are also reinforced in a monthly cartoon magazine, which is designed to promote literacy as well as awareness of health, agriculture and social and economic issues.

The project aims to link the real lives of Afghans to the drama, to underline vital messages, and to provide entertainment. The topics dealt with are researched by the project’s reinforcement team, and detailed information is supplied to the BBC for other programmes. Much work is being done on accurate needs assessment in areas where it is important to know local conditions, customs and practices, for instance in matters of personal hygiene.

A regional health coordination committee arranges broadcasts with local radio and television stations. Messages are also conveyed through mosques, schools and persons who are responsible for making announcements about immunization in village marketplaces.

The new approach has the following advantages.

- The writers and actors are local people.
- The BBC can employ Afghan experts.
- Advice is obtained from UN agencies, non-governmental organizations and Afghans working in specialist fields.
- The key messages are reinforced with additional radio output.
- The monthly cartoon magazine further reinforces the radio messages and provides a reference source.
- Monitoring allows close contact with the audience, whose most pressing problems can consequently be responded to on air.
- Problems can be anticipated, for instance by highlighting the danger of cholera during the summer.

**Dramatic progress**

The national mass immunization programmes have so far been the greatest beneficiaries of the new approach. Between November 1994 and June 1995 over 2.3 million children under five years of age and some 700,000 women of childbearing age were vaccinated.

During the first 18 months of the Afghan Education Drama project there was an appreciable increase in the number of listeners, especially among women. Furthermore, the retention of messages was demonstrated to be significant by a competition in which listeners were asked to answer ten questions on educational story lines from the soap opera: over 2000 people entered, and 80% of them gave at least eight correct answers.

In 1995, interviewees from 300 households in three provinces were asked questions about immunization at the beginning and end of a period of three and a half months during which story lines dealing with this subject were broadcast and field activities supporting the efforts of the broadcasters were undertaken. This period included the second stage of an immunization campaign in Afghanistan. Very substantial increases in knowledge were demonstrated by both men and women. For instance, when asked what the benefits of vaccination were at the beginning of the period, only 24% of men and 22% of women gave correct replies, whereas at the end of the period the corresponding values were 78% and 88%.

Radio programmes can evidently give the desired results, provided that they are well researched, well produced, and broadcast when the target audience can listen to them. Radio is very cost-effective and, unlike television, can reach the poorest members of the population. The cost of batteries is a possible constraint, which, however, could be avoided if clockwork radios became widely available.
The main lessons of the Afghan Education Drama project are as follows.

- Messages should be relevant, the format in which they are presented should be entertaining and based in local culture and traditions, and local writers should be used.

- Excessive quantities of information should be avoided, and key messages should be constantly repeated and reinforced without being boring.

- Two media are better than one; in Afghanistan, this means radio and a cartoon magazine.

- Constant contact with the audience is required for needs assessment, feedback to writers, and the evaluation of overall impact.

- Close consultation should be maintained with bodies active in the field so that they can help with the preparation, development and, if necessary, modification of programmes before they are broadcast.

- There should also be a close working relationship with health workers and organizations involved in the health sector so that the messages broadcast can be reinforced in the field.

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The toll of malaria south of the Sahara

In Africa, malaria is responsible for about 10% of hospital admissions and 20–30% of outpatient consultations. Children are particularly at risk of disease, malaria being one of the major childhood killers in rural tropical Africa, taking the life of one out of 20 children before the age of five years. The disease causes anaemia in children and pregnant women and increases vulnerability to other diseases. Malaria is also a major cause of school absenteeism. In young adults in Africa, malaria is still one of the most common diseases, and it tends to strike at the time of year when agricultural work is at its height.