Preventing COVID-19 across the radio waves in Malawi

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I have a critical role to take awareness about the Coronavirus among our listeners, particularly farmers. I tell them ways to prevent it, Gladys Phiri, Farm Radio Trust in Malawi's capital, Lilongwe, said. I put in practice what I tell my listeners. 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 Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has unprecedentedly spread across the world, sparing no continent, almost no country. At the time of writing, Malawi had registered 76 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 they should observe social distancing. Yet, in any epidemic, the greatest enemy is ignorance. Ignorance begets rumors, misinformation. The spread of fear and, nowadays, fake news is like the mains 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 UN World Food Programme in Malawi, uses radio and other channels like a hotline or SMS info service to share weather information and agro-advice to smallholder farmers. The radio is reaching out over 200,000 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 Mphale, 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 their language and 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 Chidzowu, 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 experienced an escalation of natural disasters including floods, dry spells, strong winds, disease and pest outbreaks. These disasters have destroyed people's livelihoods fueling 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) country Director David Byasley has warned that in addition to the threat posed by COVID-19, the world faces "multiple layers of existential threats 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 reduced funding. It moved quickly to develop and implement plans to respond to food distributions, adapting them in order to protect both staff and food assistance programme participants..."