

Listener Groups as a mechanism for community message delivery in Sierra Leone

Health Governance Strengthening Project (HGSP)

The USAID-funded 'Strengthening Post-Ebola Health Governance' project ran from 2017 to 2020 in Sierra Leone. UNICEF worked with the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS) to improve community confidence and utilization of public health services. This was done by improving public accountability of health service delivery and by engaging communities and civil society to demand strengthened governance in the health sector.

The Listener Groups were created to provide feedback on radio programs and their relevance to communities and to monitor whether the programs were broadcasted according to schedule, thus holding radio stations accountable.

Each Listener Group consisted of 6 members representing a cross-section of the community, in total there were 180 Listener Group Members across the country.

The 'Strengthening Post-Ebola Health Governance' project (2017-2020) and UNICEF supported Initiatives for Media Development (IMDev) to provide a media platform to share information on health services and health sector reform. The resulting programs ran on community and district radio stations across Sierra Leone from December 2019 to July 2020.

IMDev established 30 new listener groups¹, to provide feedback and to monitor these health radio programs, reporting back to the implementing partner – IMDev. They were also a mechanism for the delivery of health messages to their communities sharing the information they had learned from the programs with their peers within the community.

Listener groups have been defined as “a group of men and women who listen to radio programs actively and systematically with a view to discussing the content and above all putting into practice the lessons learned, i.e. sharing lessons with the community and taking up positive health behaviors²”.

The project's listener groups are well established in Sierra Leone with 180 members and offer both monitoring and feedback from the communities on the relevance of the radio programs towards health governance and accountability to citizens.

MORE THAN LISTENING

Conducting community outreach to encourage positive health seeking behaviors

The role of the Listener Groups goes beyond simply listening and reporting on the radio content; it involves sharing the information learned from the radio broadcasts with their communities.

In Sierra Leone, the Listener Groups have encouraged increased community participation in radio programs about health issues, empowered and encouraged community members to hold their local leaders to account about health services.

The group members are representative of the community aiding in their outreach to their peers.

“My experience being a listener club member has helped me to listen more and learn from other including my colleagues.”

- Listener Group Leader, Tonkolili

¹ Each listener group consisted of 6 members for a total of 180 members across the 30 groups
² http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/dimitra/pdf/clubs_d_ecoute_2011_en.pdf

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE LISTENER GROUPS

The groups were made up of six (6) participants from the community representing different demographics—community leaders, Village Development Committees, traditional and religious leaders, community-based organizations, health organizations, activists for women and youths, etc. A leader was appointed for each group, and the members were given training and mentorship.

The output from the groups was intended to provide support to District Health Management Teams (DHMTs), health workers and practitioners, beneficiaries and other community stakeholders on the wider community's perception of topics discussed and the broadcasts' quality.

The leader coordinated the group, assigned individuals to write up monthly reports using a template, and directed others in their participation of the listener group.

The Listener Groups had three main objectives:

- 1) **Before broadcasting:** In the radio program planning stages, the Listener Groups would describe the issues they thought should be addressed. They would also listen to the recordings of programs that IMDev had made for use by community stations.
- 2) **During/after broadcasting:** The Listener groups would monitor and provide feedback on programs, the quality of the broadcasts and their relevance to their communities. They also had an accountability role, to monitor whether the programs were broadcast on schedule.
- 3) **Community work:** They were responsible for discussing and sharing the health messages in the wider community.

Some groups met in person, and some kept in touch by SMS texts and phone calls to discuss programs.

IMDev also established a WhatsApp group to enable easy feedback and communication.

However, WhatsApp and SMS create cost implications that not all members can afford.



IMPROVING BROADCASTS AND CREATING CHANGE

Feedback from the Listener Groups was acted on and led to a number of positive changes in the IMDev/Health for All Coalition process of radio production, content and accessibility of the radio programs to the audience.

Relationship with IMDev/HFAC/radio stations

There was a positive relationship between the groups and IMDev, HFAC and the radio stations, which enabled the groups to perform their tasks successfully. Some groups had a direct relationship with radio stations, providing direct feedback to radio managers for which they had their mobile phone numbers.

Scheduling

The Listener Groups assessed the various aspects of the programs, including when they were broadcasts.

Through stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions, for an assessment of the project's radio content, **it was found that some groups missed key programs**, such as in-school youth who are unable to listen during school hours or farmers who are working early in the morning.

The Listener Groups would feedback this sort of information to the radio stations to provide them with the information needed to adjust broadcast and rebroadcast times.

For example, the Listener Group leader for Koinadugu District reported that the 8pm schedule for the radio program was inconvenient as most of the members were Muslims and they would normally be in the Mosque for their evening prayers. He advised that the group engaged the Radio Station Management and the program was rescheduled for an hour later.

Influencing content of radio programs

The Listener Groups' feedback proved to be influential, as **radio stations adjusted programs based on their input, such as topic selection**.

Members did not limit their participation to the Listener Groups.

Interviews found that members often directly participated in call-in programs to help amplify their community concerns.

“ Sometimes members have errands outside of Kabala, but we still organize our meetings through phone calls. We continue to encourage other members to secure the Africell Sim and link up to the Caller User Group service. But what is more important is that IMDev calls us to enquire about the programs in Kabala. Sometimes we give IMDev feedback through a WhatsApp group.”

Listener Group Leader
Koinadugu District

Some examples of how the Listener Groups influenced program content include:

- One Listener Group leader interacted with live health programs by calling in when there has been a question or critical comment from a member of the public.
- Other groups did not attempt to change or correct programs once they had been broadcast; instead, they pointed out gaps in information to help shape future programs. They realized it would be too expensive to ask them to re-record the program. They found that the program makers/IMDev took their suggestions on board for the future.
- The groups had the confidence, due to their trainings, to directly contact the radio management. As a result, in some cases the radio management asked them to get involved in production.
- One group asked for content to be based on what local people wanted rather than what the health worker/expert wanted – which was taken up.

Involving the community

Listener Groups helped engage / support active participation of community by:

- **Building accountability for community involvement** - one of the groups accompanied the radio team to the outside broadcasts to monitor how the radio team engaged with the public.
- **Using community voices** - before outside broadcasts, when a journalist would interview people in the community, the Listener Groups would encourage people to listen to the program so that they get to hear their 'own' voices.
- **Raising awareness on health issues in the community** - Listener Group members used the health information from outdoor radio broadcast to inform others, such as family and friends, particularly when the program had expert panelists.
- **Empowering communities to demand their rights** - the Listener Groups reported that they, and the communities they represented, became more confident in challenging health workers on access to services because of what they had heard.

One leader described how he advocated for a patient who had not had correct access to a drug, because of the knowledge he had gained on patients' rights from the programs.

Personal development for the listener group members

The Listener Group members reported improved personal development:

- **Increased knowledge** - they learned through listening and were better able to advocate in the community. For some, the project turned them from people who did not enjoy the radio – and preferred social media - to huge supporters, 'glued' to the set.
- **Improved networking** - they benefitted from establishing networks with health workers, the media and the wider community, and were confident in dealing with them.



The listener club members serve as community mobilisers during our community engagement, and this has been very successful.”

Radio Journalist, Radio Moa
Kailahun District

AREAS WHERE LISTENER GROUPS WERE NOT ABLE TO ILLICIT CHANGE

The Listener Groups identified problems where they did not report that they had affected change:

Use of local languages – the Listener Groups reported requests for more programming to be in local languages (Limba, Koranko, Mandingo, Fula, Yanlunka) rather than Krio, although some were translated into Kissi and Mende.

Lengthening the programs/Allocating more time for questions/comment from listeners – A frequent complaint was that the programs were too short or there was not enough time for questions from the audience.

Having programs in advance of broadcast – one group suggested the national team sends the recording to the district two hours ahead so they can prepare themselves better.



I think the Listener Groups are very useful for monitoring and providing feedback especially from presentation, like if the presentation style is not encouraging to the people. ...

Most times If the presenter is not doing well the Listener Group will give feedback noting the program is not enjoyed because if the style of presentation of the presenter.

Sylvanus Joseph Karim, Radio Journalist
Radio Wanje, Pujehun District

KEY CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABILITY

1) Access to radios and batteries to power the radios

A frequent complaint was the lack of availability of radios and batteries due to lack of funds, and lack of money to repair radios leading to a reduction in the ability to participate.

2) Operation of solar radio sets

There was a delay in distribution of solar radios to members, which slightly decreased interest, reducing feedback. Interest increased once the solar radios arrived. While solar radio sets may appear to be the solution, there were mixed opinions. Some groups found them effective; other Listener Group members found these hard to operate and to recharge while in the field, and difficult to receive the required frequencies.

3) Training needs

In order to ensure the viability of the Listener Groups, it is important that the group leaders are trained in people management, especially on how to coordinate meetings and manage volunteers. One leader explained that his experience showed him that dealing with people is a difficult task, especially in volunteer scenarios where people can lose focus on the task at hand, especially when there are needs to focus on income generating activities.

4) Illiteracy of members

Literacy is not a required skill to be an active member of a Listener Group. However, illiteracy is a barrier to some members ability to provide feedback when the groups do not meet in-person. As result, one leader who said illiteracy was a problem when members were asked to send their feedback via SMS resolved this challenge by asking members to prepare and send voice notes instead of SMS.

5) Lack of funds for phone calls/texts

As the Listener Groups do not always meet in-person, but rather share feedback in real-time whilst listening to programs on their own, via SMS or WhatsApp which results in cost implications for members and excludes those that are unable to pay for WhatsApp and mobile messaging platforms. Creating cost prohibitive barriers within the Listener Groups has the potential to deter new / potential members, as well as excluding the voices of existing members and community groups.

“ We had challenges with radio sets, but last month this was provided for us which I appreciate. I received a radio set with FM and SW bandwidth that can be solar and electricity charged. ...The radio set is powerful, it has battery facility and it also has torch light.”

Listener Group Leader
Kailahun District

FEEDBACK FROM OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Feedback from other stakeholders interviewed described Listener Groups as providing ‘checks and balances,’ and useful in asking questions regular listeners would not. One journalist said they were particularly effective in community mobilization to attend outdoor community broadcasts, participation on call-in programs and in their sharing of the health messages with their peers in the community.

ACTIONS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

- Money/credit to fund calls/SMS
- Training to improve people management skills to make leaders want to continue
- Hardware – radios and batteries

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LISTENER GROUPS

Involve Listener Groups in pre-broadcast planning to ensure that program messages are understood, and that formats and content will be well-received by audiences, increasing listening rates. This was happening to some extent but should be extended.

Consider scheduling times around cultural/religious activities such as Muslim prayers, students’ school hours, and women’s listening preferences (morning and evening) so it is easier for Listener Group members to participate.

Assess the supplying of more battery powered radios and batteries as requested by Listener Groups, distribute more solar powered radios and conduct training on how to use solar powered radios.

Provision of financial support/stipends for the Listener Groups to help support the cost of mobile data, transportation and to encourage more active and consistent participation.

