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Newspapers and newsletters

Unlike the fleeting images and sound bites of radio and television, printed information sticks around for a while. The newspaper may contain yesterday's news, but readers still pick it up, especially if there is no other source of credible information.

Newspapers and other printed materials have long had to contend with twin problems in rural areas: logistical and financial. How can you ship large amounts of paper out to many scattered villages? Distribution systems are poorly developed in the countryside. And how can you pay for the costs of producing, printing and distributing all those copies? Rural people cannot afford to pay the true cost of producing and delivering their newspaper, and collecting small amounts of money from lots of readers is a nightmare. Plus, advertisers, who pay a large proportion of the cost of urban newspapers, are few and far between in the countryside: rural people just aren't wealthy enough to buy very much.

Despite these problems, newspapers and newsletters are spreading in rural areas. Literacy and roads help. So do the donors, who continue to cover many of the costs.

Newspapers and newsletters vary vastly in scale. At one extreme are national papers, with sophisticated newsgathering operations, supported by press agencies and dedicated distribution services. At the other are local newsletters with a tiny, specialized readership. Despite their differences, the big dailies and the local minnows share many characteristics. Both depend on a flow of incoming information, a team of writers and editors, a distribution mechanism, and a group of readers they serve. And the paper is only as strong as the weakest link in this chain.

Like radio and television, newspapers carry a range of information: news, gossip, entertainment, cultural topics. It is important for rural readers – and for the research and extension organizations that serve them – for agricultural and environmental information to be part of that mix.

Having said that, newspapers are strangely neglected by development institutions. These institutions seem to prefer to publish booklets and brochures (which they then find hard to distribute), and fail to use the medium that so many people open at the start of the day: the newspaper. Newspapers have many advantages: large numbers of avid readers, up-to-date information, often high credibility, read by several readers, and so on. And once a story appears in a newspaper, the development agency doesn't have to worry about distributing it: the newspaper's sales force takes care of that.

Isn't it time that development agencies woke up to the potential of newspapers?

Newspapers and newsletters

La Voix du Paysan: A platform for rural people

Rural newspapers:



Pascal Airault

Nearly 30,000 copies printed every month in French, English and Arabic, distributed internationally – *La Voix du Paysan* (“The Farmer’s Voice”) is without doubt the most successful rural newspaper in French-speaking Africa. This achievement is underlined by the range of books and merchandise that *La Voix* produces, and by the requests its managers receive to expand into neighbouring countries.

How did La Voix achieve such success?

The idea to create a newspaper for rural people arose during a study visit by Cameroonian farmers to Burkina Faso in 1987. The group leaders wanted to share what they had learned with other farmers who had not been on the trip. So they designed an information bulletin to disseminate their stories. The farmers enthusiastically helped in the production work, and the bulletin was highly successful. As a result, it was continued, first as a newsletter and then from 1991 onwards as a monthly newspaper. *La Voix du Paysan* was born.

The subtitle of *La Voix* describes the paper as a “rural information, training and discussion monthly”. It provides a real platform for rural areas, in particular through the three or four pages of readers’ letters in each issue. It also allows technicians, researchers and extension agents to convey information through technical and scientific articles. These cover cropping techniques, methods to combat pests, diseases and weeds, and advice on rearing livestock and marketing farm produce.

“Working with agricultural experts is very important,” says Martin Nzegang, the editor. “But journalists rewrite all the articles in order to put the technical information into popular language so farmers can read them. For example, we translate the names of plants and diseases into the local languages.”



La Voix du Paysan journalists working on the next issue of the paper, in the offices in Douala, Cameroon
(Photo: Pascal Airault)



Bernard Njonga, publication director of La Voix du Paysan, in the paper's editorial office in Douala, Cameroon
(Photo: Pascal Airault)

Taking the pulse of the country

La Voix du Paysan rolls off the presses on the first Monday of each month. At the same time, the newspaper management organizes an editorial meeting in Yaoundé to plan the journalists' next field assignments. Each assignment lasts one or two weeks.

The reporters scatter to the various areas of Cameroon: the forest, the coast, the Sahelian zone, and the highlands. Going to the heart of the provinces enables them to take the pulse of the country and to hear the villagers' complaints.

"Very often, the journalists leave with no clear topic in mind, and no planned itinerary. Their discussions with the people allow them to determine the subjects they will ask about," explains Bernard Njonga, the paper's publication director.

Balancing acts

Nevertheless, each issue must be balanced. First, does it sufficiently reflect the voice of rural people?

Second, will readers in each of the major zones in Cameroon feel they are represented in the paper? Farmers in the dry, cotton lands of the north do not have the same interests and concerns as crop farmers in the south, or as market gardeners living around the cities. The management sometimes decides to produce different editions in order to serve these various groups of readers. For example, an insert on forest-zone crops, such as coffee and cocoa, may be included in copies of the newspapers delivered to the wetter, coastal south, while a "Sahel" insert accompanies the copies sent to the north and to Chad.

Third, each month's issue must have a balance between general articles, training and discussions.

Fourth, there should be enough pictures – a mix of photographs and illustrations – to satisfy the readers' tastes.

Last, the editors must ensure that official reports are balanced by stories about the legal and economic realities that farmers face.

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When they come back from their assignments, the journalists convene a second time. They report on their trips, the problems they encountered, the farmer initiatives they discovered, and the interviews they conducted. The team discusses and refines the subjects. "If we find that we're off balance, we can send someone on another fact-finding trip," explains Martin Nzegang.

This second meeting also provides an opportunity to evaluate the paper. During their travels, the journalists have been able to see the impact of the previous issue; they feed this information back to the management and their colleagues. The team then gets on with the task of writing.

Readers' letters

Another major source of information is readers' letters. The subjects they cover directly influence the content of the next issue. Bernard Njonga opens the letters himself. "The readers talk about their problems and pose questions. The editors take what they say into account and try to respond in various ways," he says.

One of those ways is by printing answers on the letters page itself. But the editors don't stop there. If the topic is a legal or administrative one, they may start an investigation. A technical question may result in printing a full-blown article or a separate booklet.

To respond to the demand for information, *La Voix* has developed new ways to disseminate information. Two series of booklets cover technical topics: 20,000 copies have been printed. A series of comic books cover coffee, cocoa, tomato, oil palm and water melon: 5000 copies have been produced. "Comics can convey technical information in a humorous way," says Bernard Njonga.

Another channel is the use of open days and demonstrations organized by the resource centre of SAILD (Service d'appui aux initiatives locales de développement), the NGO that provides the newspaper's organizational home. The most recent demonstration was on mushroom cultivation. Farmers and technicians choose the topics for the demonstrations, and specially selected people are invited.

Funding sources

Each copy of *La Voix* costs about 610 CFA francs (€0.93). That includes salaries, reporters' expenses (travel, board and lodging), overheads, personnel and printing expenses. Distribution costs a further 80 CFA francs (€0.12) a copy. The sale price is only 300 CFA francs (€0.46) – less than half the expenses.



Readers of *La Voix du Paysan* taking a break from work
(Photo: Pascal Airault)

A subscription for 12 issues costs 2000 or 3000 francs (€3.05–4.57). It varies according to the literacy rate and relative wealth of the place where the paper is sold: the lowest prices are charged in the Sahel zone, where living conditions are most difficult.

Overall, the newspaper itself covers between 25 and 50 percent of its costs. Some of the remainder comes from advertising and the sale of merchandise such as caps, T-shirts and comics. Subsidies from external donors such as the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (DDC, Direction du développement et de la coopération), the European Union, SOS Faim (a Belgian NGO) and EZE (Evangelische Zentralstelle für Entwicklungshilfe; Protestant Association for Cooperation in Development), ensure *La Voix*'s financial survival. In 1999, the newspaper received an additional 9 million CFA francs (€13,720) from the Agence de la Francophonie.

“Pressure from the farmers ensures that the newspaper is not filled with advertising. And our donors do not look too kindly on this source of funding. So the space reserved for ads is quite modest,” says Bernard Njonga. Only advertisements relevant to agriculture are accepted. “Because of the paper’s success, certain politicians have tried to buy pages to circulate political messages, but we always refuse,” explains Bernard Njonga: *La Voix* should stay non-political and non-tribal.

Having said that, the editorial policy is strongly committed. One example of this is the title of a recent article: “Imported foodstuffs: A catastrophe for farmers?”

Another is the publication of a letter written by farmers in Santchou complaining to Paul Biya, the president of Cameroon. In October 1997, the authorities had dissolved Soderim, a State-owned company growing rice in Santchou. The government wanted to sell the company as a complete unit, but the farmers wanted the chance to buy some of its equipment. After the letter was printed, the authorities changed their minds and made it possible for the farmers to bid for the equipment at the auction.

“Today, the newspaper’s target is no longer just farmers. Because decisions that influence rural people are made in the cities, the newspaper has opened itself to townsfolk to create an exchange, which we hope will make it possible to sensitize decision-makers,” explains Bernard Njonga. He thinks that the decision-makers’ lack of information on what happens in the field is an important obstacle to development.



La Voix du Paysan won the 1999 award for the best newspaper in Cameroon (Photo: Pascal Airault)

Newspapers and newsletters

International expansion

The current print run for *La Voix* is 30,000. That includes 20,000 for the French edition in Cameroon, and 4000 for the English version. In Chad, 4000 copies appear in French and 2000 in Arabic. "We hope to print between 100,000 and 150,000 copies in Cameroon and Chad within three years. This goal is realizable, because we estimate the potential readership, just in Cameroon, is 2.5 million people," say the editors.

Demand is increasing for additional editions in the Central African Republic, Congo (Brazzaville) and Gabon. Hundreds of NGOs have asked for permission to distribute the newspaper in the countries bordering Cameroon. Each month, 150 copies are sent to Gabon, 75 to the Central African Republic and 50 to Congo.

The team's efforts were rewarded recently when a school examination question was taken from an article in *La Voix* about cocoa production and marketing. At the end of 1999, *La Voix du Paysan* received recognition from its peers when the association of print journalists of Cameroon voted it best newspaper of the year.

The circulation headache

Newspaper circulation in rural Africa is a thorny problem. Private firms deliver papers only in the big cities. Transport in rural areas is often chaotic, and the mail service is slow and unreliable. In response, *La Voix du Paysan* has tried several different strategies.

At first, the paper was distributed by Messapresse, a private firm that delivers all the national newspapers. "That was a failure because this firm delivers only in big cities, whereas our goal is to reach a rural audience. Plus, the firm does not provide any information on changes in the habits of readers," says Bernard Njonga.

So *La Voix* tried to create its own distribution network using the rural correspondents who wrote for the paper. But writing and selling are two different skills, and the results were not convincing.

So they changed tack, and decided to professionalize the distribution. Distributors were trained in the various parts of the country. Their job was to distribute all the newspapers in their area. This experiment also failed because selling papers in rural areas was not profitable.

Newspapers through schools

In 1999 the managers implemented a new strategy. *La Voix* signed a contract with the head teachers of about 50 primary schools throughout the country. The schools receive several copies of each issue of the paper. In return, they provide rooms or reading times for

La Voix du Paysan in their weekly timetable. “Our objective is to interest young people in rural development, to get them used to reading, and to use them as conduits to their parents,” says Bernard Njonga. Preliminary results show that readership increased in the areas with such a school partnership.

At the same time, *La Voix* signed performance-based contracts with distributors in 17 areas in Cameroon. These distributors must provide kiosks in each of the districts they serve. They have a sales target, and are paid according to results. The newspapers are taken to the kiosks by bus, bush-taxi, motorbike – whatever it takes to get them to the most remote areas. The maximum time between publication date and the paper’s arrival in the bush is 15 days. In the kiosks in the big cities, it is available in one or two days. “All the same, the first people to be served are the subscribers. They should not see the newspaper on a newsstand before it arrives at their home,” says Bernard Njonga.

Responding to farmers’ needs

In May 1999, the tax authorities decided to close a feed mill belonging to a poultry-breeding cooperative in Bafoussam. This cut off the supply of feed to 100,000 chickens. Alerted by the cooperative, *La Voix du Paysan* did an investigation that showed authorities had charged the cooperative a punitively high level of tax – one that the law did not envisage for cooperatives. “Our report made the chief finance official of Bafoussam disappear for a month,” smiles Bernard Njonga. The feed mill was finally reopened, and the Ministers of Agriculture and Finance met the members of the cooperative and admitted their subordinates had made an error.

The newspaper also makes decision-makers aware of problems in trade and in food safety. For example, during a dioxin scandal in March 1999, *La Voix du Paysan* published an article on the dangers of importing frozen products from Europe. Members of Parliament produced copies of the paper in during a parliamentary debate and goaded the minister responsible into taking adequate measures.

A way of life

The editorial team now consists of 12 journalists: four each for the English and French editions in Cameroon, and two each for the French and Arabic editions in Chad. The team also includes two administrative staff, a translator, a health writer, three people to handle distribution, an editorial coordinator, and the publication director.

Economic pressures are tying most journalists more and more to their computers and telephones. Not so at *La Voix du Paysan*. The paper’s reporters are at the roots of their trade: they travel to interview people, gather stories and seek explanations.

“In the morning, we seldom know where we will sleep that evening,” says Jean Armstrong, a *La Voix* reporter. “You can travel by motorbike, taxi, in the back of a pick-up, it doesn’t matter, you get in whatever vehicle will take you where you want to go.”

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"I sometimes have to travel in the boot of a car," adds Martin Nzegang.

It may not be an easy life, but what counts is the satisfaction the job gives. "Even though you're tired from the journey, when you find yourself in the countryside or the forest in the evening, you can breathe in – it is like a rebirth," says Jean Armstrong. "Talks with the villagers continue by the fire late into the evening, and the next day you set out again with your head full of images."

This spirit pervades the whole team. "We don't distinguish between Sundays and Mondays," says Jean Armstrong. "Being a journalist with *La Voix du Paysan* is a way of life."

It is not a life for everyone. "Several people tried to work on the paper, but they realized that it wasn't their vocation," remembers Bernard Njonga. "Some others tried to smuggle in articles they had been paid for. We quickly found the stories and rejected them."

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Newspapers and newsletters

Information for globalization: A question of survival



Jacques Sultan

The deregulation of agriculture is leading to major changes for Côte d'Ivoire's farmers. Instead of receiving a guaranteed price from a government agency, they have to sell their cocoa, coffee and rice themselves on the open market. They must also buy fertilizers, seeds and other inputs from the market, and arrange for storage and transportation. And research and training services are being privatized too.

The farmers – over half the country's population – are ill-prepared for these changes. ANOPACI, a national association of agricultural organizations (Association nationale des organisations professionnelles agricoles de Côte d'Ivoire) is trying to help them adapt.

Sylvain Kouao, president of ANOPACI's communication commission, says that information and communication are key to helping producers face their new challenges. "Our strategy, our action plan, pays special attention to things that can strengthen the farmers' ability to negotiate. Our members are facing new situations and are involved in difficult negotiations with other players in the industry."

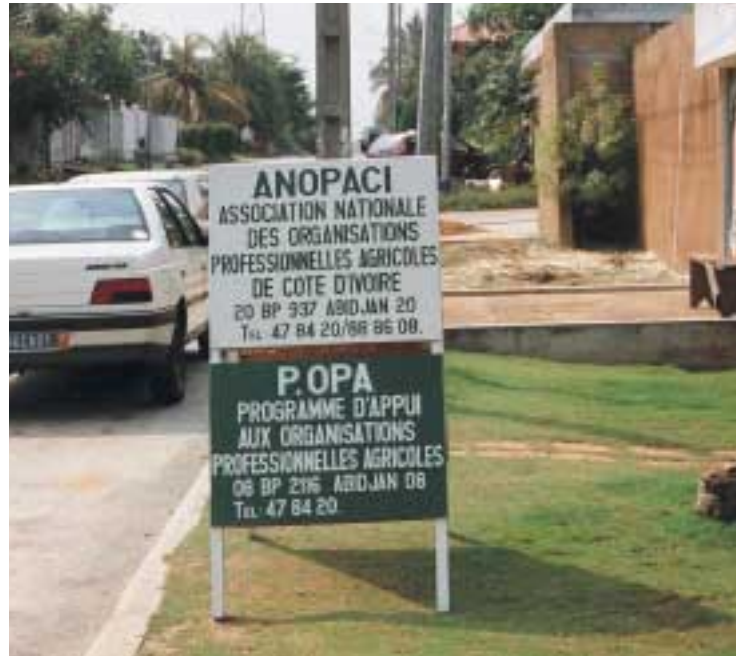
"Whether they grow cotton, coffee, cocoa, rubber or food, it is essential for them to have regular, up-to-date information on prices, on changes in the industry and market conditions, and on what others are doing. It is a question of survival."

This reasoning has led ANOPACI to design a communication approach that performs three major functions:

- Providing managers of professional agricultural organizations (farming groups, unions, cooperatives) with economic, technical and financial information to strengthen their negotiating position;
- Facilitating information flows among different producers' organizations, industry sub-sectors and regions within the country;
- Publicizing ANOPACI's positions on major agricultural issues, especially on land, agricultural finance, training, research, market organization and prices.

A magazine for agricultural professionals

Le Professionnel agricole ("The Agricultural Professional") is ANOPACI's main tool. This magazine began production at the start of 1999. Published once month with support from Coopération française, it has 24 full-colour pages and a circulation of 5000.



Outside the ANOPACI office in Abidjan,
Côte d'Ivoire
(Photo: Jacques Sultan)

The magazine is written in French because its main audience is the French-speaking senior staff of professional organizations. These managers distribute copies to their organization members.

“At the beginning,” says Marie Josée Tafforeau, who coordinates the editorial team, “we wrote mainly about general topics, ANOPACI’s organization and work, news about the government, and changes in the various sub-sectors. Plus, each issue featured a particular experience, an organization or a ‘person of the month’.

“Then we started putting out special issues on each branch of the industry: coffee, cocoa, rubber, livestock, credit, fish culture. We treated each branch in depth: we described its economic and technical set-up, based on information we gathered from various parts of the country.”

How can I start a pig farm?

“But very quickly,” she added, “we were faced with requests from readers who wanted technical information on all kinds of subjects: How can I plant coffee trees? How should I care for a sick animal? How should pesticides be used? How can I start a pig farm? What do I have to do to set up an operating account? Is tobacco-growing more profitable than rice? How should I control maize diseases? How can I get a credit line?”

This deluge of requests is evidently because the producers have no other source of relevant information, and they do not get the answers they need from the ever-shrinking government extension services.

So *Le Professionnel agricole* has changed. It has begun including technical guides, written in simple language and illustrated so that readers can use them easily.

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These guides have proved popular. To make them even more useful, the magazine plans to publish them as detachable inserts. It may also produce a series of guides that could be sold separately.

The pages containing readers' letters and monthly economic indicators have also been bolstered to enable readers to voice their opinions and to keep them informed about market trends.

The distribution hurdle

"We have won the first part of our bet," says Séraphin Biatchon, ANOPACI's secretary-general. "In under a year, the newspaper has gained credibility; the articles are increasingly systematic. The mail we get from our readers is encouraging: they tell us that the newspaper is well written and that it accurately reflects the concerns of the rural people in Côte d'Ivoire. But we should not rest on our laurels. We still have some big hurdles to jump."

The first hurdle is distribution. This is handled by the eleven organizations that are members of ANOPACI. But sales through these channels generate less money than expected, suggesting that distribution is not as effective as it should be.

"With better distribution, we could print 50,000 copies," says Séraphin Biatchon. "There are 500,000 people in the coffee and cocoa sector alone. There are 200,000 in cotton, 25,000 in oil palm, and so on. We could be the most popular monthly in Côte d'Ivoire."

The magazine does indeed have a large potential audience. In every village there are people who can speak French, and who could read or pass on information to their neighbours.

But how to get the magazine to them? Places to sell the magazine are gradually being set up in Abidjan and other main towns. The Ministry of Agriculture's field offices could distribute copies, as could companies such as Nestlé. ANOPACI has concluded an agreement with Nestlé to sell copies to cocoa and coffee farmers through its stores and buying-posts.

In 2000, improved distribution will be the main focus for the management of *Le Professionnel agricole*.

Financial autonomy

The second big hurdle will be even harder to jump. Each issue of the magazine costs 3 million CFA francs (approximately €4600), but only one-fifth of this amount is generated from sales or advertisements. Coopération française covers the shortfall. The magazine would like to cut its reliance on this support to ensure its sustainability and independence.

Steps to achieve this goal include publishing at two-monthly intervals (instead of every month), attracting more advertisers, raising the sale price from 300 to 500 CFA francs (€0.45 to 0.70), improving sales, and publishing the technical inserts as separate booklets.

Information gathering

Finding information to fill the magazine is an uphill task. “It is a question of motivating our association members,” says Sylvain Kouao. “We have to stimulate the free, informal flow of information, because we have only one journalist and we cannot afford a network of field-based correspondents.

“For example, at the moment, the end-of-Ramadan festival is approaching. I have just found out that the sheep that I could have sold yesterday for 20,000 francs (€30) will now fetch 26,000 francs (€39). That’s interesting information for anyone who raises sheep.

“The leaders of ANOPACI’s member organizations should put more effort into collecting information from their local members, get used to sending us interesting tidbits quickly and informally, and take lots of photographs. It is a habit that has to be learned.”

Linking audiences

“Farmers need specific information, fast,” says Séraphin Biatchon. “The east of Côte d’Ivoire might be drowning in bananas, but the weather might have spoiled the harvest in the south. It should be possible to link the demand in one place with the supply in another. A producer with 1000 tons of yams in his field has to find a buyer quickly. He needs to be linked with other players in the industry.”

Séraphin Biatchon believes that the solution to this problem lies in other forms of communication: radio, for example, or new technologies.

To make a living you need information

“The producer who has a ton of coffee to sell should know how much it will fetch in Abidjan, and what direction the price is moving, so he can decide whether to sell or hold,” says Sylvain Kouao.

“The same producer must have the possibility of choosing among different fertilizer producers to get the best price and quality. Animal raisers should have access to a list of local processors, transport firms, and packing companies. That is especially important in areas such as pig production, where competition from subsidized products from the European Union is fierce. These days, in order to live from farming – to make a real living from it – you have to have access to information.”

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Internet on the farm?

“The information in *Le Professionnel agricole* is targeted,” says Séraphin Biatchon, “but it is not fast. It comes out once a month. If I need information for tomorrow, I won’t find it in the magazine. Shorter channels are needed, closer to home, at the cooperative or village level. Radio could be promising, but rural radio stations are not sufficiently developed in Côte d’Ivoire. The small stations that do exist here and there have too limited a range.”

“Many villages are remote,” he adds. “The farmers are subject to pressures from traders who come to buy their output by the side of the field. The farmers do not know the market prices. They can be ‘had’. And this is a very bureaucratic country: they have to get photocopies of documents, identity cards, official letters, quotes, invoices. . . All these things cost money: they have to go to town, pay for transport and lodging, waste precious time.”

ANOPACI is tackling this problem in collaboration with Winrock, a non-profit consultancy firm. Their initiative is called “Internet on the Farm”. It aims to build a network of village telecentres offering a whole range of services: word processing, photocopying, fax and e-mail.

The telecentres will also allow users to access databases containing economic, technical and financial information on the major agricultural sub-sectors, marketing and supply channels. They could also get information and training on health, education and the environment. And lastly, the centres should make it possible to send local-level information to the editors of *Le Professionnel agricole*.

This idea is still in the preliminary design stage. ANOPACI does not want to skip steps, so it is studying all aspects of the situation, especially the lack of electricity in many rural areas, the need to maintain equipment, and the economic viability such investments. A questionnaire was sent to ANOPACI member organizations to check their interest in the idea. ANOPACI will assess the results.

Three village test-sites have been identified in the north, centre and south of the country. The African Development Bank may be interested: it wants to test alternative ways of supplying electricity for this new type of rural media.

What’s the price of coffee today?

In 1998, the World Bank started an information system for coffee and cocoa prices. This uses computers and a website to display the current prices of these commodities and make them known to farmers via the daily press and the radio.

This system is called PRIMAC (Prix du marché du café et du cacao). It is currently managed by Caistab (a commodity price-stabilization agency), together with government agencies and farmers’ organizations. But PRIMAC has not performed as well as was hoped, and

ANOPACI thinks it can help improve it. ANOPACI is negotiating with the World Bank to take over parts of PRIMAC and to expand it to cover commodities produced by ANOPACI members: cotton, palm oil, rubber, banana and pineapple.

With *Le Professionnel agricole*, the telecentres and this price-information system, Ivorian farmers will soon have powerful information and communication tools to help them face the challenges of globalization.

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Newspapers and newsletters

Women communicating: Organizing to help ourselves



Jacques Sulttan

Women in rural Africa are socially and economically marginalized. It is hard for them to get land on which to grow crops. It is hard for them to access credit, seeds and technical advice. They have to overcome many obstacles if they are to establish their own enterprises and achieve recognition as farmers in their own right.

Yet women play a vital role in the rural economy. They head 30 percent of all households. They do much of the back-breaking field work, and are responsible for most post-harvest processing and produce marketing. Not to forget their roles as mothers, teachers, cooks, nurses and household managers.

Africa's women know that if they are to progress, they have to rely on their own energies. So increasing numbers of women are organizing themselves into groups and associations to tackle all kinds of social and economic problems: in agriculture, small-scale industry, marketing, literacy, nutrition, health, education and culture. Here are three examples, taken from the newsletter *Paysannes africaines*.

- In Mauritania, 40 women started a market-gardening cooperative. After a few years, thanks to their enthusiasm and hard work, their quarter-hectare plot had developed into a 3-hectare orchard, and the cooperative had grown to include 130 members. Their success enabled them to obtain outside support and to acquire a motor-driven pump, a machine to remove maize husks, three sewing machines, and a literacy-training room. These women can now read and write, and manage their cooperative themselves. They market their produce and have acquired fuel-efficient stoves, eliminating the need to collect firewood each day.
- A group of women in Benin processes groundnuts and makes cakes, soap, ointments and shampoo. Selling their output improves their standard of living and gives them independence.
- The women in a village in Chad were tired of carrying firewood and farm produce on their heads. They clubbed together for a loan to buy an oxcart. To help pay for the cart, they rented it out to other villagers. In three years, they had made enough money to refund the loan and to pay for repairs on the cart.

These initiatives remain fragile and isolated. They have not benefited from the technical and financial assistance that outsiders can bring. But perhaps because they are modest, they are encouraging. They seem do-able.

By making such success stories more widely known, it is possible to motivate other rural women to form similar self-help groups.

Swapping ideas

The *Paysannes africaines* ("African women farmers") network was founded in 1991 in Paris as a result of repeated requests by African women for information exchange.

The network publishes a newsletter, likewise called *Paysannes africaines*, three times a year. It is sent to about 370 women's groups in 15 French-speaking countries in Africa. It is very simple: just two A4 sheets, folded in the middle and stapled. The text is in French, and the drawings are by African artists.

The newsletter aims to promote information exchange among women's groups, expand their knowledge and experiences, help them develop their potential and make them heard outside. The newsletter itself is based on self-help. Although it is published in Paris, the entire contents come from African women: group leaders or extension workers who write about real village experiences.



Some pages of issues of the newsletter *Paysannes africaines*

Regular sections

Paysannes africaines contains several regular sections. The main one contains brief articles in which writers describe their organizations' experiences in group-managed fields, market gardening, micro-enterprises for processing produce, grain banks, village shops, craft cooperatives, mutual-credit funds, and so forth.

Another section covers technologies. It describes methods developed or adapted in the villages, recipes, gadgets, and ideas to solve daily problems. Examples include how to process cassava, make soap, dry fruit and vegetables, conserve tomatoes, make candles and cough syrup, dye cloth, make couscous from yams, control termites, and build mousetraps and stoves.

Readers are invited to send in descriptions of their own methods to the newsletter so that others can benefit from them. The most interesting ones are printed in separate brochures, which are sent out to readers.

The section containing readers' letters is always full. Letters allow readers to express various points of view, and enable the editors to gauge the newsletter's impact and to identify readers' needs.

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There is also a question-and-answer section. A reader's question is printed in one issue of the newsletter, and replies based on other readers' experiences appear in the next issue. In this way, *Paysannes africaines* fosters dialogue among readers based on their willingness to help each other.

A final section contains information on training courses, meetings and publications of relevance to the readers.

Positive results

Paysannes africaines has a positive impact, judging by the growing number of subscribers and reader feedback. The deliberate editorial choice to promote direct dialogue among women lends the newsletter a down-to-earth, practical flavour.

There is still the problem of language. Many rural women in Africa do not understand French, so must rely on others to translate the newsletter for them and to feed information back to the editor.

Partnerships with national organizations would allow local-language versions of the newsletter and technical brochures to be produced. This approach would also make it possible print more copies and distribute them more widely, and at the same time link up with organizations working with women's groups in the field.

In 2000, after being published in Paris for the last eight years, *Paysannes africaines* moved to a new home in Africa.

Women's turn to speak

New avenues are opening up for *Paysannes africaines*, thanks to a partnership with CESAO (Centre d'études économiques et sociales d'Afrique de l'Ouest). This is an NGO based in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, which gives special emphasis to rural women's issues (see Box 7).

CESAO's main office in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso
(Photo: Jacques Sultan)



BOX 7**CESAO: A self-help tool for rural people**

CESAO is an international NGO, founded in 1960 and based in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. It promotes self-help through training, support, exchanges, advice and publications. It works in partnership with the major organizations engaged in rural development: associations of farmers, women and youths, and field-level service agencies.

With each partner, CESAO discusses the types of activity that would best meet its needs. CESAO can organize various types of activity: workshops, meetings to share and reflect on experiences, training courses, field-level support activities, written or audiovisual materials, lobbying, etc.

Workshops and meetings

Workshops and meetings provide an opportunity for farmers' organizations to learn about and discuss hot topics: decentralization, privatisation, land reform, the legal and institutional frameworks for consortia of farmers' associations, and so on.

Training courses

CESAO offers ten courses a year in its training centre for two types of participants: managers of rural organizations, and staff of extension agencies and other rural support services.

Field-level support

Depending on the needs of each partner, CESAO's field-level support work can take several forms: specialized training courses, consultancies, evaluation, audits, study visits, information exchanges, or action-research projects.

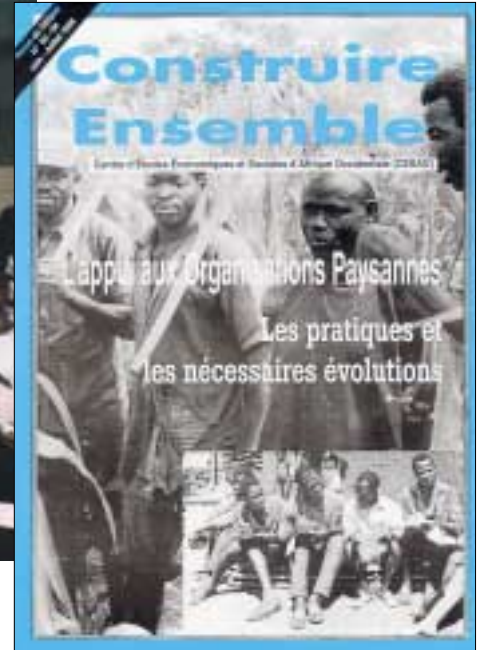
Documentation and publications

CESAO has one of West Africa's best resource centres on rural development. This centre subscribes to many national and international periodicals, and serves students, researchers, farmers and officials.

CESAO produces various publications:

- The periodical Construire ensemble ("Building together") appears three times a year and contains lengthy reports on rural activities;
- The newsletter Les nouvelles du CESAO ("CESAO News") is aimed at rural people. It is published in French, Mooré and Dioula;
- Échanges ("Exchanges") is a series that describes rural experiences. It is written in basic French; translations are planned in the main local languages;
- Les cahiers ruraux ("Rural notebooks") are French-language technical bulletins that serve trainers and extension agents.

Newspapers and newsletters



Above: CESAO's library is heavily used (Photo: Jacques Sultan)
Right: The June/July issue of the CESAO periodical, *Construire Ensemble*

In 1996, after the women's world summit in Beijing, CESAO organized an international meeting in Bobo Dioulasso entitled "La parole aux femmes" ("Women's turn to speak"). More than 150 women from eight countries in West Africa took part. They decided to develop a plan of action for rural women in each of their countries.

Subsequent meetings in six countries, supported by CESAO, brought together numerous women's associations that wanted to contribute to this effort. These meetings resulted in national action plans and established committees to implement them. A further meeting in March 2000 reviewed the national initiatives, translated them into a regional action plan, and began building the foundations of an organization to represent the interests of rural women in West Africa.

Paysannes africaines will become the communication tool for these networks. It will retain the spirit that led to its creation – the sharing of information and experiences among rural women – but will adapt itself to the needs and priorities set by the new networks.

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Newspapers and newsletters

Reporting on the West African environment: Panos, the environment and democracy



Paul Mundy

A long list

Forests being chopped down. Eroded soils. Drought. Creeping desertification. Plants and animals on the verge of extinction. Oil spills. Traffic-clogged cities filled with rubbish, choking on foul air. The list of West Africa's environmental problems is long. Yet the public knows little about them. And without public pressure, governments ignore the environment. The list of problems grows longer by the day.

That was the situation in the late 1980s. It was clearly time to raise environmental issues in the public's mind, and to put them onto policy-makers' radar screens. But how?

Institut Panos, an NGO specializing in media, analysed the situation and identified two key constraints. Like the public, journalists in the region knew little about environmental issues, so they could not report on it accurately. And media bosses didn't think that the environment was an issue that would sell newspapers or attract listeners. The result: few stories on the environment, leading to little interest, leading to fewer stories.

Planting the seed

Alymana Bathily, coordinator of Panos West Africa in Dakar, Senegal, explains how Panos attacked these constraints. In 1990, it launched a project called "Afrique Envi". It made agreements with the managers of newspapers and radio stations throughout West Africa to support the production of information on the environment. The newspapers agreed to publish a page of environmental stories each week; radio stations were to produce one hour of programming each month. The agreements were initially for one year, but could be renewed for another year if desired.

In return, Panos provided the newspapers and radio stations with training, information and equipment. It trained more than 40 journalists in environmental issues. It published guides, in English and French, to environmental issues and how to report on them. It commissioned primers on the environment in several countries, including Niger and Chad – two of the countries worst affected by desertification.

Panos also subsidized the reports by providing recording equipment and travel costs to enable the journalists to get to environmental trouble spots. To ensure that the journalists who wrote the stories actually got the support, Panos split the funds between them and their



Some of Panos' materials on the environment and communication
(Photo: Paul Mundy)

was far greater. Media managers began to realize the value of environmental content: they saw that such stories would sell newspapers and entice listeners to tune in.

Panos did not find it necessary to renew the project when it ended in 1995: the newspapers and radio stations were by then covering environmental subjects by themselves. Afrique Envi had planted the seed, and the seed had grown. The environment had become mainstream.

Media, democracy and peace

Panos is currently using a similar approach to increase coverage of other neglected topics: human rights, democracy and women's issues. It trains journalists in the professional skills needed, introduces them to the issues, and supports coverage by newspapers and radio stations.

Several countries in West Africa are torn by civil war. In such situations, unscrupulous leaders can use the media to stifle dissent or to inflame passions. Panos is seeking ways to use the media to resolve these conflicts peacefully: by encouraging dialogue, reinforcing professional ethics, lobbying for media independence, and pressing for changes in laws to make it easier to set up newspapers and radio stations.

Sharing radio programmes

One way to increase dialogue is to share programmes. To do this, Panos has established an experimental electronic "bank" of radio programmes at its office in Bamako, Mali. All that is needed to use the bank is a phone line, a cassette recorder and a computer equipped with a modem. A radio producer connects to the bank via the Internet (www.oneworld.org/panos_audio). With a few clicks of the mouse, he or she can select a programme from the several hundred in the bank, and download it for broadcast. With another few clicks, the producer can also contribute to the bank programmes that his or her own station has produced.

management. As proof that the stories had been printed or broadcast, the journalists would send Panos newspaper clippings or audiocassettes containing the programmes.

The direct result of this effort was at least 12 one-hour radio programmes, plus 48 newspaper articles and features, throughout the year in each country. The indirect result

BOX 8

Decentralization and local development

Many governments in Africa are decentralizing, giving more and more power to provincial and district administrations. Local governments, it is argued, are closer to the people than are ministries in the distant capital: they are more flexible and more receptive to local needs. But effective decentralization depends on effective communication with local people. This is difficult because most local institutions lack the skills and facilities to disseminate information, and there are few local newspapers.

In Senegal, Panos is trying to overcome this problem through an initiative called Residel (Réseau d'informations internet sur la décentralisation et le développement local). The project began in May 1999 and is supported by CTA.

Residel is an unusual partnership linking the public sector, associations, NGOs and media organizations. The public-sector partners include a branch of the Ministry of Agriculture that is responsible for food security, and ISRA (Institut sénégalaise de recherches agricoles). They have agreed to feed the network with technical information.

The second type of partner consists of associations of regional presidents, mayors, and the leaders of rural communities. The third group is NGOs such as FRAO (Fondation rurale pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest) and CNCR (Conseil nationale de concertation et de coopération des ruraux). These organizations have agreed to feed the network with information about the life and activities of rural communities.

The media form the fourth group. Several newspapers and community radio stations have agreed to disseminate information from the network to their readers and listeners.

The Residel project supports the production of programmes and articles on decentralization and local development. The information provided to the network is converted into digital form and is available from the Residel coordinator.

After only a few months of operation, the network had gathered information on a wide range of topics, including decentralization, local development finance, credit, food processing, crop protection, bush fires, afforestation, management of rural roads, waste processing, sanitation, peri-urban market gardening, horticulture and fruit-tree production, soil fertility, savings banks, fishing codes, small-scale industry, rural taxation, and tourism.

Regularly supplied by the actors in local development, the network promises to be an invaluable resource for decentralization and local development in Senegal.

The service is free, as is the software, which can be downloaded from the Internet. The radio station saves time and money: in pre-Internet days, just about the only way to get programmes from outside was to wait for a cassette to arrive in the mail. The station can also share its own programmes with other broadcasters, also at zero cost.

Traditional “snail-mail” is still important, though: the programme bank uses it to receive news items from correspondents in 20 African countries and to send programmes to more than 100 radio stations throughout Africa and in Europe.

Financial independence = editorial independence

Minimizing costs is important for the media, Alymana Bathily explains. Many newspapers and broadcasters in West Africa struggle to make ends meet. Independent media are vital for democracy, but there can be no independence without economic viability.

To guarantee the independence of publishers in Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana and Mali, Panos has supported the creation of a central agency to buy paper for them. Panos also conducts research on media financing and searches for ways that the media can boost their incomes by selling their products and services.

Panos West Africa was established as a branch of Panos Paris, but became independent at the beginning of 2000. It has offices in Dakar, Bamako (which house the radio-programme bank) and Accra. Because of the importance of the media to democracy and development in West Africa, Panos attracts support from several donors, including CTA, DANIDA, DGIS (Netherlands), the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, and Canada’s IDRC (International Development Research Centre).

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Newspapers and newsletters

Press-agency privatization: A news agency for Africa



Paul Mundy

Nelson Magombo edits a story: it happens to be about the privatization of the Agriculture Development and Marketing Corporation in his home country of Malawi. He adds a few finishing touches, then hits a key on his computer to send the story to his chief editor.

Gabu Amacha, the Ugandan who heads the English Desk, reads the Malawi story. He wonders whether it is interesting enough for French speakers to have it translated (he decides against) and considers whether to send it out immediately or to wait for Tuesday's economics bulletin (he thinks it can wait until Tuesday).

Quiet efficiency

Welcome to PANA, the Pan-African News Agency. This office in Dakar runs with quiet efficiency, sifting through stories, editing them and sending them out to newspapers, radio and TV stations.

The team of 10 editors – six working in English, four in French – works in shifts to process reports from the agency's 48 correspondents scattered across the continent. The stories fall into three main categories: hard news, sports items and special articles. Stories in this last category are sent out as weekly bulletins: on the environment and development (Mondays), economics (Tuesdays), science and health (Wednesdays), gender (Thursdays), and a review of the African press (Fridays). Each bulletin contains about a dozen stories and features, written by correspondents or by PANA staff themselves.



Peter Masebu, editor, outside the PANA office in
Dakar, Senegal
(Photo: Paul Mundy)

All the stories are sent out by e-mail on the Internet. They are picked up by newspapers and broadcasters throughout Africa, Europe and North America. Eager for news from Africa, newspapers for African-Americans in the United States are frequent users of PANA stories.

Despite the importance of agriculture to Africa, there's no special bulletin on this sector. Peter Masebu, an editor from Tanzania, explains that's because news on agriculture may fall into any of the other bulletins. News of frost affecting tea production in Kenya is likely to land in the economics bulletin, while one on DDT stockpiles in Tanzania will end up in the one on the environment. Overall, PANA deals with perhaps 60 stories on agriculture each week, out of a total of 350 stories on all subjects.

Responding to revolution

The story of PANA is a story of two revolutions: political and technological. Established in 1979 by the member States of the OAU (Organization of African Unity), PANA started news transmissions in May 1983. It originally obtained stories from its members' national news agencies; it edited these stories and redistributed them to the national agencies.

Then the first revolution happened. The end of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989 created a democratic tide that washed across Africa. Authoritarian governments and strict controls gave way to democratic governments committed to press freedom. A wave of structural adjustment swept the continent: in an effort to reduce their expenditures, governments privatized State-run monopolies and eliminated subsidies.

That meant the end for many of the national news agencies that had fed PANA with stories. It meant an end, too, of many governments' willingness to fund a pan-African news agency. PANA would have to be privatized. Instead of getting stories for free from the national agencies, it would have to buy them. Instead of relying on income from government contributions, it would have to start charging clients for its services.

In 1993, Unesco began helping PANA adjust to these new realities and prepare for a stepwise privatization. In October 1997, PANA was converted from an intergovernmental institution into a private firm called PANA Press, in which the governments held shares. This was to enable 75 percent of the shares to be sold to African media groups, banks, telecommunication companies, NGOs and private investors. The remaining 25 percent of the shares were to be transferred to the national news agencies of the member countries.

At the same time, PANA Press professionalized its operations, raising its output twentyfold, from 2000 words a day in 1992 to 40,000 words in 1996. It developed a network of correspondents and stringers (independent reporters) in most of the continent's capitals. There are now five regional bureaux, in Addis Ababa, Kinshasa, Lagos, Lusaka and Tripoli. As part of the privatization, PANA Press aims to establish more offices around Africa as well as bureaux in Brussels, London, Paris and New York.

Newspapers and newsletters

The second revolution

At the same time, a second revolution was taking place in computers and communications. Back in 1983, PANA relied on telex to receive and transmit stories. It began using computers in 1990, and has recently installed new equipment and sophisticated news-management software. It had planned to install its own satellite network, but before it could do so the Internet arrived, offering far easier and cheaper communications.

The PANA Press websites (<http://allafrica.com/panaenglish/> in English; <http://allafrica.com/panafrançais/> in French) provide news stories that are updated throughout the day.

Can PANA compete in the new marketplace for news? It competes against wealthy, sophisticated European and American news organizations. But it has advantages: a commitment to Africa, unique knowledge of the countries it serves, and the largest network of news-gatherers on the continent.

PANA must carve out its niche: providing high-quality, reliable, independent news about Africa. If it can find ways of generating a profit and attracting the investment it needs, PANA will be a key part of the information system in this vast, complex and rapidly changing continent.

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