



Broadcasting for Better Health in Afghanistan

The boulangi - a potato-filled pastry - is neither warm nor fresh, but the child can't resist the treat. Flicking flies away, the vendor hands one to the little girl. Later, the child's mother cautions her against eating food left uncovered for too long. A pregnant mother waits at home while her husband takes their son to be immunized. At the clinic, he learns immunization can protect his wife--and through her, the new baby.

In Afghanistan, where 67% of the total population can neither read nor write and the female illiteracy rate rises to 99% in some provinces, radio is the only effective communications method to raise awareness of health issues. Dr. Amanullah Hussein, Director of Information, Education, and Communication at the Afghan Ministry of Health, uses radio spots with scenarios like these to teach people how to safeguard themselves and their families' health.

With forty radio stations broadcasting throughout the country - fifteen of them newly established and an estimated 37% of the population tuning in - radio is a valuable tool to disseminate important health messages. Messages targeting women are especially important in efforts to lower Afghanistan's high maternal and child mortality rate.



Photo: REACH/ M. Kabir

Budding playwrights review their scripts at the USAID Writing for Radio Workshop in Kabul.

To ensure the continued production of scripts, Hussein joined with USAID to hold a series of "Writing for Radio" workshops in which twenty-eight men and women learned to write and produce stories and plays aimed at changing behaviors and improving health practices. USAID programs support midwifery education and the training of community health workers in Afghanistan.

As part of the program, women Afghan physicians at the workshop advised on effective communication with rural women. As a pre-test, the class made rough recordings of stories selected for broadcast, took them to villages and clinics, played them for a representative target audiences, and then surveyed reactions. Did the story hold the listener's attention? Prompt any questions? And most importantly, what did the audience learn? Will behaviors change?

At one clinic, women were surprised to learn about the value of breast feeding and that milk, rich in antibodies produced shortly after childbirth, is neither dirty nor harmful but instead helps protect infants from disease. Revised using audience feedback and professionally recorded in both Dari and Pashto complete with music and sound effects, the spots are now distributed for broadcast.

"We want to convey priority health messages in ways that both inform and entertain."

- Qudsia Hasimi, workshop participant

Altogether, three workshops have produced seven 12-15 minute plays, nine stories, and numerous short spots, all using dialogue and Afghan scenarios to convey vital health information. Since the first of the radio plays successfully aired on Radio Afghanistan in August 2003, stations throughout the country have repeatedly broadcast the latest spots and stories, eager for more. Private radio stations will foster continued and expanded production of radio health messages delivered as plays and stories.

Success Story

