Giving Voice to the Voiceless

Africa and Afghanistan

While others scour the local market for staples like cornmeal and cooking oil, João Bernardo Golombole looks for news and insight. Decades of armed conflict have taken their toll on Angola, and towns like Seles, in the coastal province of Cuanza Sul, are still picking up the pieces. Golombole wants to know how they're doing. Plugging a microphone into his palm-sized minidisc recorder, he crouches in the dust beside a vendor named Maria. She tells him of the drought that has ruined the harvest, and how she now makes charcoal to support her family. The interview later airs on national radio, carrying Maria's words far and wide.

Communities like Seles rarely make the news in Angola, but a new radio broadcasting initiative is slowly changing all that. Now fully operational in seven African nations plus Afghanistan, the initiative is among the latest offerings from the Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN), a multimedia news service run by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Like IRIN's website, which carries topical reports by veteran journalists and aid workers, the radio initiative offers timely, credible coverage of communities facing perils like hunger, disease, hatred and war.

In locations like these, television and the Internet are not yet up to the task. "Radio is the cheapest, most readily available source of information in these areas," says Mark Dalton, a veteran aid worker who is IRIN's representative in New York. "It reaches places where roads are bad and literacy is low, where electricity is scarce and batteries are pricey. We've handed out 2,000 wind-up radios in Angola alone."

Best of all, the communication flows two ways: not only keeping vulnerable populations informed but also conveying their concerns to fellow citizens living hours away. The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security supports the radio initiative so that at-risk people and communities can access vital information and use it to address critical challenges. IRIN's coverage of these places also serves as an early warning system, alerting the outside world to pressing needs and emerging threats.

IRIN started in the wake of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, as a way for humanitarian organizations working there to share information. Soon it began publishing its own news and analysis and making documentary films, mostly in English. The radio initiative began in 2001 in Somalia. It then added coverage, in local languages, of Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Lesotho, Liberia and Sudan.

In Afghanistan, IRIN Radio holds workshops where local journalists—half of them women—upgrade their skills and explore ways to cover the issues most relevant to their audiences. After decades of repression and strife, the nation is still adjusting to the idea of an independent press. "Many universities here still teach the old Soviet methods," says Sayed Abdul Rahim Rahmani, 24, a rising star among Afghan journalists. "From IRIN we've learned how

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▶ *Like these two radio reporters, many of the Afghan journalists working closely with IRIN broadcast their stories on independent stations that are owned and operated by women. IRIN PHOTO*

Children in Angola listen to a wind-up radio. IRIN has distributed 2,000 of these devices, which are powered by a clockwork mechanism and a solar panel, in remote parts of Angola. IRIN PHOTO

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A female reporter interviews a family in Afghanistan. IRIN conducts workshops where Afghan journalists—half of them women—can upgrade their skills and explore ways to cover the issues most relevant to their audience. IRIN PHOTO

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to do shorter, more accurate pieces that present more than one point of view."

Since 2004, IRIN has produced more than 50 programs in Afghanistan. They've aired, in Dari and Pashto, on independent stations across the country. Recent subjects include child soldiers, declining wheat harvests, polio eradication, business investment, H.I.V. prevention, drug abuse and problems facing returning refugees. "We try to reflect the concerns of ordinary people and investigate what's going on in their communities," says Michael Dwyer, a former BBC reporter who runs IRIN's studio in Kabul. This approach is starting to catch on, as stations beef up their own coverage of humanitarian issues.

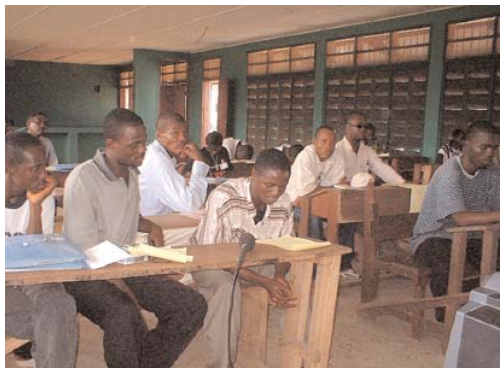
Most of IRIN's radio work is in Africa, where it is extending its reach to cover nine additional countries: Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Namibia, São Tome and Príncipe, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Uganda. In Somalia, it makes ready-to-air programs on the peace process, health, education, refugees and displaced people. In Côte d'Ivoire, it helped reporters at Radio Lepin cover a land dispute between two rival communities, helping to defuse the situation before opportunists could use it to fuel ethnic tensions.

A popular soap opera set in the refugee camps of western Tanzania, home to some 192,000 uprooted Burundians, also bears IRIN Radio's imprint. Called *Tuyage Twongere* ("Let's Talk" in Kirundi), it's a coproduction with JRS-Radio Kwizera in Ngara, Tanzania. Listeners say the drama, which airs twice a week on both sides of the border, delivers a powerful representation of life in the camps. It's been an eye-opener for Burundians back home, many of whom nurse grudges against those who fled. "I didn't know they still spoke Kirundi!" said one listener in Burundi. Another fan of the show added: "I have learned not to blame a whole ethnic group for what some have done."

Building on the soap opera's success, IRIN co-hosted a series of public debates on related issues, such as land and property disputes involving returnees and the rights of widows and orphans. What's more, it provided training to Burundian journalists aimed at improving coverage of these issues.

Similar workshops in Angola helped IRIN develop a network of 19 stringers, or local correspondents, including Golombole. A former combatant, he now runs a landmine awareness program in Cuanza Sul for Africare, the international aid group. As he travels the province, he takes the opportunity to record interviews with ordinary citizens using equipment donated by IRIN. Like Maria, the charcoal vendor, they hope their voices will carry far on Radio Nacional de Angola, which often broadcasts Golombole's reports.

Better communication between remote communities and urban centers is a critical factor in achieving human security in places like Angola, Burundi and Afghanistan. "The ability to get reliable information, and to express their own needs and concerns, is a new thing for many people," says Dwyer. "Radio provides a way for them to say, 'This is what we want, what we think is important.'"



▲ *Up-and-coming journalists attend a training session in Monrovia, Liberia. The session covered many skills needed to compile reports for broadcast, including field-based reporting, the use of mini-disc recorders and microphones, script writing, studio recording and computer editing.* IRIN PHOTO