

LOCAL FM RADIO GIVES COMMUNITIES A VOICE

Airing health concerns via local radio programming



After Radio Bahas was conducted, we noticed health workers behaving more responsibly and gently with us and the community. Also, the outreach clinic we had asked for was built in our ward.

Pratima Bhusal, 25,
Narainapur Ward 4,
Banke District

Nepal is a country with low literacy, where few can afford a television and electricity shortages keep the power off for much of the day. So when USAID's Health for Life (H4L) project needed an effective way to encourage productive dialogue between health care providers and the communities they serve, radio was the obvious choice. Through the Antenna Foundation, a local NGO that specializes in media advocacy and awareness-raising, H4L supports the Radio Bahas program, which holds regular, town hall-style meetings where community members meet with health officials to get answers to their questions and find solutions to their problems. In a deeply hierarchical society, this approach gives the group the courage to speak out in a manner that they might not have as individuals, letting them speak more openly, and providing knowledge critical to improving health care in the community.

Here's how it works: a team from the local radio station travels to communities in their district to conduct and record a public discussion on health issues. The conversation is moderated by someone from the radio station, but community members do the majority of the talking, all of it in the local language. Community members raise their health care concerns, local service providers respond, and together they come up with a solution. After concluding, the recording is edited and broadcast during the time-slot for Jeewan Ka Laagi Swasthya – literally, "Health



(Top) Reka Budathoki, 34, speaks to a health official in Rim VDC, Salyan District during a Radio Bahas program to be broadcast on Radio Kapurkot FM.

(Bottom) Resham Upadhyay, 39, Rim VDC, Salyan District during a Radio Bahas program to be broadcast on Radio Kapurkot FM.

PHOTOS: JACOB KASELL, USAID HEALTH FOR LIFE

for Life" – another H4L-sponsored health information radio program. Since its start in late 2013, when 28 independent, community FM radio stations broadcast their first episodes of Radio Bahas, the monthly radio program has recorded hundreds of participants and reached tens of thousands of listeners.

Although the issues raised are often complex, the opportunity to have their voices heard and rebroadcast is empowering and gives valuable insight into what people on the ground think about the health care system and what can be done to improve services. Furthermore, listeners get the chance to hear members of their own community talking about health issues that matter to them. In the nine months the program has been running, H4L has supported local FM radio stations to conduct 180 public hearings for direct interaction with an estimated 9,000 community members and stakeholders. An informal survey revealed that many people listen to the broadcasts, and have in turn spoken with friends and family about the issues raised during the forums.

Enabling communities to identify and solve problems for themselves puts them in control of their health care. Participants and listeners alike are eager to hear their concerns taken seriously, and for these hard-to-reach communities, there is no better way to emphasize the legitimacy of their concerns than to have them proclaimed over the airwaves. ●

TRANSFORMING LIVES

When Phularam Chaudhary was in grade four, he was infected with encephalitis, leaving him with hearing and speech impairments. Coming from a deprived family in Kailali district, he studied only until the sixth grade and faced stigma and discrimination at the hands of not just his employers and community but his family as well. He was paid less than others at work, and his family thought he was a burden. He was depressed and desperate to find a purpose in his life.

His search ended when he met Jyoti Chaudhary (no relation), a Community

Disability Worker under the USAID Strengthening Rehabilitation in Districts Environs (STRIDE) project. STRIDE improves the functional independence of people living with disabilities and encourages their participation in education and employment. Jyoti regularly visited Phularam's house and provided counseling to him and his family members, eventually making everyone believe that Phularam can do something productive in his life.

Phularam, motivated by his family's changing attitude toward him and through Jyoti's support, got trained in bamboo

"EVERYONE HAS A PURPOSE IN LIFE"

crafts and products at Small Bamboo Entrepreneur Association in Malakheti. He put his heart and mind into the training and even earned NRs. 5,000 while still at the training center.

Today, he owns a small bamboo furniture production center and earns NRs. 6,000 to 7,000 per month. He has earned the respect of his family and community.

"Jyoti has been a guiding light to me. She helped me know myself and my strength. Today, I have a purpose in life," said Phularam with a wide smile. ●



(Top) Phularam in his bamboo store. (Bottom) CDW's follow-up visit with Phularam (middle) at the training center.