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United Nations Africa Renewal

Bio

Africa tunes in to peace radio

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By [Mary Kimani](#)

Mega FM's broadcasts may not reach far outside northern Uganda. But in an area that has been brutalized by decades of insurgency by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), it is having an impact. Oryema, a former LRA child soldier who later returned home, explains why. "I did not feel anything bad about killing," he says. "Not until I started listening to Radio Mega.... I actually heard over the radio how...we burnt homes.... And I started to think, 'Are we really fighting a normal war?' That is when I started realizing that maybe there is something better than being here in the bush."

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Funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), Mega FM is one of several such stations that have been set up in Africa by the United Nations, donor agencies, churches and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help communities build peace after wars have ended.

UN peace missions have been setting up such radio programmes in post-conflict countries since the 1980s. In areas where ethnic and political factions have incited hate or spread propaganda, UN-run stations have sought to counteract the messages of such broadcasts, especially after extremist leaders used radio in the early 1990s to fan ethnic hatred and incite genocide in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia.

William Orme, a policy advisor on independent media development for the UN Development Programme (UNDP), argues that such stations are critical. "Unless you have a neutral place where accurate information and grievances can be aired, there can be a renewal of conflict. Such media is not a luxury, it is a necessity," he says.

Spurring action, accountability

Ms. Frances Fortune, who runs radio projects in eight countries emerging from conflict, including Angola, Burundi, Sierra Leone and Liberia for a non-governmental group, Search for Common Ground (SFCG), observes that "governments are not very good at communicating to their people. Often there is so much going on during and after conflict that people need to know and understand. The role that media can play in supporting peace is immense. You can change the way a government engages."

Such media are important long after war, adds Ms. Fortune. After conflicts, "many people would argue that just providing information, strictly news is adequate. That is not so. Media has to be utilized to support peace. Even prevention of conflict is possible if you provide people with alternative ideas early enough."

Stations can also promote good governance. In Sierra Leone, local councils are required by law to post their income and expenditure statements on a public notice board. But many people are illiterate and do not understand or question how resources are used. To



Lord's Resistance Army leader, Joseph Kony. Photo: Joram Jojo.

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address that problem, the SFCG developed a programme called *Accountability Now*. "We go with a microphone and ask the council or treasury clerk to read the account and expenditure statement, explaining what is being done and why. This allows the community to demand accountability," station head James Ambrose told *Africa Renewal*

Risks and objections

But not everyone agrees that the media can or should play such an expansive political role. Some mainstream media practitioners and conflict resolution experts, argue that peace building requires specialized skills that journalists do not have. Mr. Yves Laplume, the former programme director of Radio Okapi, the highly regarded UN radio station in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, argues that in his experience, "people need information, but do not want to be told what to think. We gave people real facts, verified facts, well sourced. We don't add any comments. We saw in a different survey that that they liked it... They want you to give them the information and let them make up their minds. It is basic, but it has a great impact."

And the risks can be high. In northern Uganda, some LRA commanders, recognizing the role of radio programmes in persuading their soldiers to give up arms, attempted to limit access to radios. They also retaliated violently, massacring people in the home village of an LRA commander who left the movement and spoke about his decision over the airwaves.

The dilemma of sustainability

But the biggest long-term threat to these projects is that most of them are funded by NGOs, the UN or aid agencies such as DfID. Once a conflict is over, it becomes harder to secure the money to continue operations.

Maintaining such stations exclusively with donor support is impractical and commercial financing can be limited. The Swiss Hironde Foundation's Star Radio in Liberia tried to achieve sustainability by selling advertising. But it managed to raise only a third of its costs because the economy is weak and few companies could afford to advertise. For those able to operate on local resources there is often a risk that the best-trained journalists will leave for higher paying jobs or that the government or political groups may take over the equipment or exert editorial pressure.

UNDP suggest that donors and African countries consider turning such stations into independent, publicly supported broadcasters similar to the Public Broadcasting Service in the US and the BBC in the UK. Even in countries not recovering from conflict, they argue, "editorially independent and professional news gathering/public interest broadcasting services on a national scale require substantial state or private subsidy."

Argues Mr. Orme, the UNDP adviser, "if we agree that this work is important for democracy and peace building, then donors have to think of media in a different way. They have to think of all the goals — human rights, MDGs, HIV/AIDS — and [see] media as essential in achieving them. It's critical to have these stations, and potentially there is enough funding available to sustain them"

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