The Listening Post is a platform for two-way communication between extension services and farmers. It takes advantage of the ubiquitous access to radio and mobile phones in rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa to engage farmers on development initiatives. Through the Listening Post, development organizations share information and encourage dialogue with radio broadcasts, while farmers provide information and feedback in real-time via mobile phone.
What is The Listening Post?

The Listening Post is an interactive rural radio platform that combines specialized farm radio broadcasts with Uliza, a tool created by FRI for gathering and analyzing feedback and questions from audience members, particularly farmers. Uliza is built on an interactive voice response system developed by Voto Mobile that enables listeners to vote on poll questions, leave messages and request the delivery of specific information. Listening Post programs have involved radio mini-series on specific topics with listeners invited to participate in polls, ask questions and offer opinions with the aim of empowering them to send unfiltered opinions to policymakers and other development partners.

A Service for Organizations that Serve Farmers

While all of FRI's radio programs incorporate two-way communication with farmers, the Listening Post is the first program design to focus on collecting feedback for FRI partners and other development stakeholders. Mini-series topics and questions are established by project partners, in negotiation with farmers, extension services and broadcasters.

The Listening Post can assist organizations to:

- Promote and link listeners to extension services and products offered in their area;
- Solicit unfiltered opinions on specific questions in real-time.

The results help inform project partners on practical ways to improve their projects through mid-course correction, without needing to wait until the end of their monitoring and evaluation cycle. This opportunity to re-tool projects based on the voices of real users creates a real-time feedback loop and gives rural radio listeners more chance to give direction to projects operating in their region.

The Listening Post uses Voto.
INTERACTIVITY AT NO COST TO FARMERS

HOW LISTENER POLLING WORKS:

1. Each episode of a Listening Post program poses questions to farmers.

2. Listening farmers respond by sending a missed call or “beep” to a number advertised on the radio program.

3. The listener is called back by Uliza, FRI’s polling tool. This callback is free.

4. The system presents the weekly poll, a simple question with up to six multiple choice responses. The listener responds to the poll by pressing numbers on the keypad.

5. Listeners are given an opportunity to leave a message answering a more detailed follow-up question or with any questions or opinions related to the topic.

6. These messages from farmers are shared with the extension agent. The agent records a personalized response that is played on the radio.

7. Callers’ votes are tabulated in real-time for use by both radio station personnel and development partners such as extension agents.

8. The poll results together with the audio recordings (opinions and questions) are assembled on the Uliza dashboard, where they can be accessed by broadcasters, extension officers and project partners. Audience feedback can quickly be converted to radio program content as presenters discuss poll results or play recordings left by listeners.

9. Data gathered from regular subscribers to the Listening Post allows FRI and partners to profile and map users by geographic location, gender, age or any other metric valued by project partners. Weekly episodes of the Listening Post also include important information such as weather forecasts and the latest market prices, as well as guest experts to discuss the results of the previous week’s questions.

BENEFITS TO FARMERS:

• Poll results, questions and comments of listeners are shared directly on the radio program to hear.

• Extension agents can answer frequently asked questions, live on air.

BROADCASTER’S COMMENT

Deborah Mpagama from Radio Free Africa has this to say about Listening Post, “The Listening Post is good because, as a broadcaster it gives you real-time feedback from your listeners which is very important. You get the sense of how many listeners are with you and have understood you. It is great to hear their opinions which we wouldn’t have anticipated. Also, the Listening Post gives you a sense of whether the listeners have understood the topic or not [and] what to focus more on a particular topic.”

This program was carried out in partnership with the Purdue University “Purdue Improved Cowpea Storage (PICS)” project in Tanzania.
**Case Study**

**Consulting Farmers About Cowpea Storage**

The Listening Post was engaged to support the *Purdue Improved Cowpea Storage bags* (PICS) project carried out in Tanzania in 2015 by Purdue University, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The goal of the PICS project is to make three-layered hermetically sealed storage bags available to farmers at a low cost, thereby reducing cowpea grain loss from insect infestation.

FRI worked with *Radio Free Africa* in Tanzania to create an entertaining radio show that engaged farmers on the issue of cowpea storage. Voice polls using FRI’s Uliza platform provided the pathway for farmers to respond to questions for which the PICS researchers needed answers.

The first week’s question asked listeners how they store their harvest. A voice message left by a listener named Jumanne Hassani, a farmer in the Morogoro region, shed light on one of the biggest challenges farmers face.

He said, “I store my harvest in a sack for about five to six months. Usually I find some part of my stored crop gets attacked by insects and some part is not attacked, but generally a lot of the crop is eaten by insects in the sacks. When I want to sell my harvest, I usually sell for a lower price because the quality is lost.”

The Listening Post for this project was able to bring stories like this together with real data from mass polling to build a fuller picture of the challenges faced by farmers across the region. Throughout the radio series, farmer polls and voice messages sent by listeners helped project managers at PICS understand how farmers were using their bags and how they could improve their operations.

The questions asked and opinions given through voice recordings enabled the project managers to understand the general beliefs and attitudes toward the PICS bag. These were addressed by members of the PICS team, who participated in live radio shows, answering questions and clearing up misconceptions on air.

**Vital Statistics**

*4 radio stations. 4 six-week programs. Here are the results.*

- 11,764 Individuals participated
- 64,499 Unique interactions (calling the system and answering the voice poll)
- 16,125 Individual voice messages left on system
- 150 Questions answered by extension officers on air

To date, four Listening Post programs on four different topics have been carried out in Tanzania. These aired under the title *Paza Sauti — Raise Your Voice.*
EXAMPLE

POLLING FARMERS ABOUT BEAN PRODUCTION

SAMPLE QUESTION
What bean variety are you planting?
Press 1 if you are planting Rosecoco
Press 2 if you are planting Yellow Soy bean
Press 3 if you are planting Kitenge bean
Press 4 if you are planting Iringa beans
Press 5 for others
Press 6 for I don’t know

OPEN-ENDED FOLLOW-UP QUESTION
“Why do you prefer planting the type of bean above? Explain by recording your voice.”
» The farmer can leave their response by recording a short (one minute) audio message after a beep.

For a Listening Post project with N2Africa in 2015 the focus was bean production. Questions around bean production were featured on the Listening Post program. Farmer responses were fed back to the project teams at CABI and N2Africa for use in re-tooling their projects and gaining extra insight into the impact of their efforts across Tanzania.

ULIZA
Uliza, from the Swahili word for “ask,” is the technological platform that facilitates polling through mobile phones. Developed by FRI’s ICT Innovation Lab (The Hangar), the Uliza dashboard also enables project partners to access poll results remotely in real time.

This program was carried out in partnership with N2Africa and CABI in Tanzania.
LESSONS LEARNED

Listening Post programs gather a great deal of information. Using this information poses a significant challenge to development partners. First, they require expertise to meaningfully interpret the results. Secondly, they require staff to address all the issues raised (e.g., to listen to thousands of audio messages, categorize them and follow them up). Careful planning is required to ensure that poll questions gather information that can be used and that staff are available to interpret results and respond to issues raised.

FUTURE PLANS

EXTENSION SERVICES

The Listening Post can serve as a platform for extension services, expanding their reach and providing access to information for farmers across large geographic areas.

The radio program can feature and explore new technologies and help listeners understand and consider these technologies.

The polling system can:

- Gather feedback from farmers on current practices, how they would use—or not use—the new technologies.
- Enable farmers to “place an order” for a technology.
- Allow farmers to register their satisfaction with new technologies they implement.

Furthermore, Listening Post technologies can strengthen agricultural extension services by:

- Polling farmers about the agricultural issues they face.
- Raising the profile of extension workers.
- Alerting farmers to when extension workers will be visiting their areas.
- Allowing farmers to “book appointments” with the extension workers.
- Gathering farmer feedback on their satisfaction with the work of their extension workers.
- Mapping areas that have not been visited by an extension worker in a long time.

AGGREGATING FARMERS TO IMPROVE MARKET ACCESS

The Listening Post can help farmers connect (or aggregate) to improve their access to both input suppliers and markets for their products.

A Listening Post radio program can tell farmers about large-scale buyers and provide a platform for coordinating the aggregation of produce to meet the buyers’ needs.

On the other side of the supply chain, farmers requiring specific agricultural inputs can pool together to place a bulk order and/or to arrange a convenient location for input dealers to deliver their goods.