

Summary report on the

**Joint EMRO/ISESCO regional
training workshop on the role of
radio stations in promoting
health awareness in rural areas**

Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
17–19 November 2008



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO), in collaboration with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), organized a regional training workshop on the role of radio stations in promoting health in rural areas, in Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic, from 17 to 19 November 2008. The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Study and discuss the impact of radio in rural areas of the Eastern Mediterranean Region;
- Exchange knowledge and experience on production of health-oriented radio programmes;
- Sensitize the regional broadcasting networks for production and promotion of health messages;
- Introduce WHO priority public health campaigns to media representatives;
- Practise initiating radio messages on selected health topics;
- Share successful radio programmes on health; and
- Establish a regional network of radio broadcasting professionals for dissemination of health messages.

The workshop was attended by media professionals representing radio stations and health experts from Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. It was also attended by representatives of ISESCO and staff of WHO EMRO.

On behalf of H.E Dr Maher Al-Hosami, Minister of Health of the Syrian Arab Republic, Dr Mohamed Gamil El Owayd, Deputy Minister of Health for Primary Health Care, inaugurated the workshop. Dr Owayd highlighted the potential of radio as a major resource for education, awareness and attitude change for all age groups, and for rural areas in particular. He also highlighted the

importance of “tailoring” effective health messages that fit the nature of radio as a unique medium in order to raise health awareness among the public in the rural areas.

A message from Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, was delivered in the opening session by Dr Ibrahim Beitelmal, WHO Representative for the Syrian Arab Republic. In his message, Dr Gezairy noted that the use of radio on a wider scale and its integration with modern communication tools such as the internet could help in reaching the public, raising awareness on important public health issues and overcoming communication barriers. He reiterated the need to enhance partnership with the media.

Dr Abdel Aziz Al Jeboury, ISESCO, addressed the workshop regarding the power of radio in reaching rural areas that other media might not be able to reach. Geographical, language and even economic barriers that usually hindered populations in rural areas from accessing media could be overcome by using radio in innovative ways, hence bridging the knowledge gap between people living in urban areas and those living in the rural areas. In this sense radio could be a useful tool in fulfilling the development needs of rural societies.

The opening session also witnessed a lecture by Dr Mohamed Haytham El-Khayat, Senior Policy Adviser to the Regional Director. He said that from its very beginnings, the WHO Constitution had promoted a positive definition of health, describing it as the complete state of well being, physically, mentally and spiritually. He reiterated the role of the media in helping people to reach this state through raising their health awareness.

2. Summary of discussions

The training course used a variety of communication methods including presentations, debates, role-play, work group discussions and writing and evaluation sessions to assess radio health programmes produced by different countries.

The participants were briefed on WHO's current global health agenda and discussed ways in which the radio could contribute to the achievement of the health agenda in light of certain challenges, such as language, geographical and cultural and illiteracy. It is important to give due attention to neglected health issues as well as well to define the "critical" health problems of each country which perhaps differ from the concerns of other countries. The issue of adapting the technical and scientific nature of health issues into newsworthy or attractive health messages that fit the radio was widely discussed.

Participants produced on-the-spot radio programmes on health issues. They were displayed and evaluated by all attendants. Health issues such as tuberculosis, health during emergencies, avian influenza, tobacco control and AIDS were tackled. The practice highlighted radio's flexibility low cost.

A debate on good and bad practices in handling the issue of emergency was well received by the participants, who considered it interactive and interesting approach to provide a balanced coverage of health issues and communicating information. The outcome of the debate was that: nothing can replace good preparedness for emergencies

As an example of how to plan a radio campaign to control tobacco, a presentation was made on planning and implementing radio campaign. It tackled the most effective formats like, drama, talkshows, songs, audio

spots, dialogue versus monologue, on air magazines, contests and phone calls.

Although radio by definition and nature is a one-way flow of communication, recent trends are towards more interactivity, carrying feedback on the spot and involving listeners in live programmes through telephone calls, SMS, emails and internet.

One session was allocated for networking, sharing experiences and exchanging material among radio personnel. It was very effective in strengthening relations among participants and providing them with broader perspectives based on different country contexts.

Discussions highlighted the fact that health for all means providing health awareness – as well as health services – to all segments of society, especially in remote areas where health facilities are either difficult to access or nonexistent. In such situations, the role of the media in reaching people with health awareness is vital and complementary to the role of the health sector. Because the media is not limited by geographical barriers, it can be used to reach out to populations in remote areas or those affected by emergencies. What needs attention is the quality of the health messages targeting these areas and dealing with emergency situations. Discussions also highlighted the need for health messages to be concise, informative, culturally sensitive, understandable in terms of language and dialect, and relevant.

Finally, discussions highlighted the need for radio personnel to make use of modern technology in their field. Pod casts, really simple syndication (RSS) and the internet are increasingly used in the Region as a means to enhance the role of radio and facilitate the role of radio producers.

3. Recommendations

To the media

1. Encourage the use of modern technology to enhance the role of radio especially use of the internet to host radio stations.
2. Ensure that radio personnel are well oriented to new trends in the communication field and enriched with up-to-date information on health. They should be urged always to verify the accuracy of their news by giving sufficient time for research and avoiding unreliable sources.
3. Encourage the use of all techniques and formats that help make radio programmes attractive, modern and effective.

To ministries of health and the media

4. Make the best use of radio to disseminate health awareness in rural areas. The characteristics of radio will help in overcoming many obstacles such as illiteracy and geographical, social and economic barriers prevailing in rural and marginalized areas.
5. Promote radio-tailored messages that use easy-to-understand language, concise slogans and simple drama to make their messages more appealing to the public.
6. Build constructive relationships based on collaboration and mutual respect in order to bridge the gap between the media and the health sector in the Region.

To WHO

7. Encourage health officials to pre-test radio messages to determine the best format and dissemination approach for their target audience.
8. Establish an electronic network that gathers all participants and other media personnel and health staff to share information and materials.
9. Make use of online media training for field staff.
10. Act as a facilitator between national health authorities and the radio.
11. Facilitate coverage of health and humanitarian actions in times of emergency.
12. Sensitize radio stations on the importance of emerging health issues that have not received sufficient media attention in the Region, such as emergencies, safe hospitals, AIDS, diabetes and healthy lifestyles.