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Harvesting Voices: Empowering Agriculture through Community Radio in Bhola, Bangladesh

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Abstract: The study was conducted among peasant farmers in Bangladesh's island district of Bhola. This southern section of Bengal is Bangladesh's largest island and one of the most disaster-prone places, bordered by the Meghna River and the South Bay of Bengal. Nearly 98% of the island's peasant farmers must be enrolled, and 60% must learn to read and write. A few farmers can be identified. On February 18, 2015, the Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust (Coast Trust) established Radio Meghna in response to the need for a community-based radio station that would broadcast in the local dialect. This study discovered considerable efficiencies despite a significant distance between community radio and the oldest peasant farmers over the age of fifty. Only 2% of farmers over fifty heard Radio Meghna; others did not because they needed to purchase a radio and learn how to use it with a cell phone. However, approximately 85% of peasant farmers aged 15 to 50 recognized the name Radio, whereas only 30% listened to agricultural programs broadcast by Radio Meghna. Radio Meghna becomes a capital hub for information when the power goes out during a natural disaster.

Keywords: Role, Agriculture, Community Radio, Bhola, Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

Community radio stands as a beacon of grassroots empowerment, particularly in rural Bangladesh where access to information is crucial for agricultural prosperity. With nearly half of Bangladesh's population engaged in agriculture and over 70% of its land dedicated to farming, disseminating agricultural knowledge becomes paramount. Community

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radio serves not only as an information lifeline but also as a platform for fostering social change, especially during natural calamities when it facilitates early warnings and post-disaster rehabilitation efforts.

In Bhola, an island district surrounded by the Meghna River and the Bay of Bengal, community radio plays a pivotal role. Farming and fishing are integral to livelihoods here, making tailored agricultural information vital. Initiatives like Radio Meghna, established by the Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust (Coast Trust) in 2015, exemplify how community radio can amplify local voices and address specific needs. Broadcasting to approximately 18 unions and reaching nearly 400,000 listeners, Radio Meghna provides critical agricultural guidance and entertainment, fostering more lucrative markets for farmers through collaboration with broader networks across Bangladesh.

The historical evolution of radio communication underscores its transformative potential. Pioneering scientists such as James Clark Maxwell, Heinrich Hertz, Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose, and Guglielmo Marconi laid the foundation for wireless communication. Post-World War II marked another milestone with initiatives like Miner's Radio and Radio Sutatenza championing community empowerment. In Bangladesh, radio broadcasting began in 1939, evolving significantly during the Liberation War to establish Bangladesh Betar Kendro in 1971. More recently, community radio emerged with Radio Lokbeter launching in 2011. Today, 18 community radios operate across 25 districts, serving around 7 million people daily with programs tailored to local needs.

This study aims to assess the impact of Community Radio Meghna on agriculture in Bhola. Its objectives include gauging the community's inclination toward utilizing community radio for accessing information, understanding participation levels in radio programs, investigating the influence of broadcasts on decision-making processes, and evaluating the adequacy of agricultural information disseminated. Given Bhola's unique geographical and climatic conditions—exacerbated by climate change vulnerabilities—tailored approaches to disseminating scientifically sound practices are essential.

The guiding research questions explore whether community radio effectively reaches remote farmers if they heed disaster-related guidance, and reasons behind any shortcomings in meeting farmers' needs. Addressing these questions will illuminate Radio Meghna's effectiveness and identify areas for improvement, ensuring alignment with local farmers' evolving needs. Community radio, defined as a "Third Pillar" of media alongside commercial and public broadcasting (UNESCO, 2021), operates independently and focuses on specific regions. These stations reflect community culture while addressing developmental aspects like education, health, agriculture, and disaster management (Khan et al., 2017). Research from Zimbabwe highlights peasant farmers' reliance on community radio for agricultural information (Nyareza & Dick, 2012). Similarly, in Bangladesh, community radio serves as a lifeline during disasters such as Cyclone Sitrang in 2022, where Radio Meghna played a key role in disseminating preparedness information (BBC News, 2022).

Beyond disaster management, community radio guides marginalized farmers in cultivation practices and market connections (Pobitro, 2022). Broadcasts in local dialects ensure accessibility, catering to diverse farming communities. Despite its importance, research on community radio's agricultural contributions remains limited in Bangladesh. Most studies rely on primary data, necessitating comprehensive evaluations combining both primary and secondary sources. To address this gap, this study employs a mixed-method approach focusing on Radio Meghna. It incorporates Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) among stakeholders—including staff and listeners—to gather insights into the station's impact on agricultural practices and decision-making. By examining factors such as listenership, participation, decision-making influence, and sufficiency of agricultural information, the study provides a holistic understanding of Radio Meghna's role in supporting agricultural livelihoods in Bhola.

Findings will contribute to existing literature on community radio in agriculture and inform policy efforts to enhance its effectiveness. As a medium that reflects local values and addresses specific challenges, community radio remains indispensable in empowering rural communities. Through initiatives like Radio Meghna, it continues to act as a catalyst for sustainable development and resilience in agriculture-dependent regions like Bhola.

METHODS OR PROCEDURES

Research methodology serves as a benchmark for conducting research systematically and disciplined. This study employed a mixed-method design comprising both qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect data effectively. The survey method and focus group discussions (FGDs) were utilized for data collection. As stated by Chapman, a social survey involves systematically collecting facts about individuals residing in a specific geographic, cultural, or administrative area (Rahman, Khan, & Das, 2019).

As described by S. P. Gupta and M. P. Gupta, sampling functions as a tool to understand the characteristics of a population by examining a representative subset of it (Rahman, Khan, & Das, 2019). However, more than accurate sampling from the population can introduce bias into the overall analysis. Community Radio Meghna (FM 98.4) broadcasts within a radius of 25 kilometers, covering approximately 18 unions (Obaid, 2019). A stratified sampling approach was employed across the 18 unions to ensure representative sampling. When the population exhibits heterogeneity, as in this case, stratified sampling proves to be more effective (Rahman, Khan, & Das).

The 18 unions were stratified into three sections based on their distance from the central point of radio broadcasting. Subsequently, 100 individuals were randomly selected from the six village market sections. These markets serve as focal points for farmers to engage in buying and selling activities, representing diverse demographics and perspectives within the community. This study employs a rigorous sampling methodology to minimize bias and ensure that findings accurately reflect the sentiments and experiences of the population under investigation.

RESULTS

The study on Radio Meghna's impact in Bhola reveals significant insights into its role as a communication tool for farmers. With 82% recognition, Radio Meghna has established itself as a trusted platform, particularly among older, male farmers who dominate the listener base. However, engagement remains limited, as only 15% of farmers rely on it for agricultural advice, while 62% depend on fertilizer shopkeepers due to their accessibility and expertise. This highlights a gap in trust and outreach for Radio Meghna despite its potential.

Listening habits show that 58.6% tune in for 0-2 hours daily, primarily during morning (9 am–12 pm) or evening slots (5 pm–8 pm), aligning with farmers' schedules. Smartphone usage is prevalent, with 51.61% accessing broadcasts via mobile devices, reflecting moderate technological adoption among participants. Notably, younger farmers engage through social media, underscoring the need for digital integration.

Despite broadcasting agricultural programs like "Krishi O Krishok," only 19.35% of farmers reported altering farming practices based on Radio Meghna's guidance. During natural disasters, however, its importance spikes, with 39% relying on it when electricity disrupts TV and internet access. For instance, during Cyclone Sitrang in 2022, Radio Meghna played a vital role in disseminating critical information and coordinating relief efforts.

Challenges persist, including weaker signal coverage beyond 25 kilometers and financial constraints limiting transmitter upgrades. Additionally, only 3.22% of listeners actively participate in agricultural programs, suggesting untapped potential for community involvement. These findings emphasize the necessity for targeted programming, improved infrastructure, and stronger collaboration with agricultural experts to enhance Radio Meghna's influence and empower Bhola's farming community effectively.

DISCUSSION

Radio Meghna (FM 99.0) has emerged as a significant communication platform for farmers in Bhola, Bangladesh, particularly during natural calamities and in disseminating agricultural information. This study delves into various aspects of Radio Meghna's impact on farmers, exploring farmers' awareness, participation in agricultural programs, decision-making processes, and challenges faced in accessing radio broadcasts. ***Farmers' Awareness about Radio Meghna:*** The study surveyed hundreds of farmers within Radio Meghna's coverage area and found that most young farmers, aged 15 to 50, actively listen to Radio Meghna on their smartphones and ordinary handsets. However, a generation gap exists, as older farmers above 50 often need more radio sets or mobile phones capable of tuning in to Radio Meghna's broadcasts. Consequently, efforts are needed to raise awareness among older farmers about Radio Meghna's programming.

Radio Meghna during Natural Calamities: As a vulnerable area along the Bay of Bengal, Bhola faces frequent natural disasters. Radio Meghna is critical in disseminating information during such calamities, broadcasting 24/7 to raise awareness about essential survival measures. Despite being the second option for many people when electricity is available, Radio Meghna remains a lifeline during emergencies, facilitating relief efforts and keeping farmers informed and calm. ***Farmers' Participation in Agricultural Programs***: While Radio Meghna aims to amplify the voices of coastal communities, more farmer participation in agricultural programs is needed. Efforts should be made to increase farmer engagement by providing training sessions or incentives for participation. Inviting agricultural extension officers for weekly phone-in programs can bridge the gap between farmers and agricultural experts.

Farmers' Changing Decisions in Cultivation: Radio Meghna's role in influencing farmers' cultivation decisions is noteworthy. With guidance from Radio Meghna and the local agricultural extension department, farmers have altered their planting decisions based on the information received. However, disseminating information about plant diseases and remedies effectively remains a challenge, as farmers often seek advice from non-expert sources. 5. Hearing Hours of Farmers and Signal Transmission Challenges: Farmers' work schedules, which often span from dawn to dusk, pose challenges in determining prime broadcasting hours for agricultural programs. Nevertheless, Radio Meghna continues to broadcast throughout the day, ensuring coverage within its 25-kilometer radius. Efforts should be made to optimize signal transmission and address technical issues to enhance accessibility.

Recommendations: Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance Radio Meghna's effectiveness in reaching marginalized farmers: -Conduct regular surveys to assess audience enrollment progress and preferences. -Provide older adults with radio sets or mobile phone training to facilitate access to Radio Meghna's broadcasts. -Improve signal quality through antenna optimization or increased transmit power. -Increase farmer

participation in agricultural programs through targeted outreach and incentives. -Train radio jockeys to speak dialects, ensuring better comprehension among diverse farming communities. Radio Meghna serves as a vital communication channel for farmers in Bhola, contributing to their awareness, decision-making processes, and disaster resilience. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the proposed recommendations, Radio Meghna can further strengthen its role in supporting the region's agricultural livelihoods and community development.

CONCLUSION

Community radio is a recent concept in Bangladesh. In March 2008, Bangladesh's Ministry of Information issued the "Community Radio Installation, Broadcast, and Operation Policy-2008". The policy has been updated to read "Community Radio Installation, Broadcast, and Operation Policy-2017." Under this approach, 18 community radio stations aired their programming in remote rural locations. Agriculture is the primary source of income for the majority of these marginalized people. If community radio is genuinely motivated to eradicate poverty and social problems in the neighborhood, it will take a massive effort to succeed.

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