



# *Interactive radio drama*

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## **Summary**

**Interactive radio drama can be used to gain public participation in planning for biodiversity conservation. The major advantage of this tool is that radio breaks the barrier of literacy, and is heard even in remote areas where there is little or no electricity. This tool can be adapted for other specialised subjects, such as wildlife, water, medicinal plants, or other aspects of local culture.**

**The format described here was developed by the Centre for Ecological Sciences (Bangalore) and All India Radio (Bangalore). A 14-episode series of weekly radio programmes was used to encourage public participation in preparing a biodiversity action plan for the state of Karnataka, India. This was done under the larger process of preparing the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) for India (2000 – 2004).**

## **Background**

The NBSAP for India was a project of the Ministry of Environment and Forests of the Government of India, and was coordinated by the national NGO Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group. It was funded by the Global Environment Facility, through the United Nations Development Programme. All countries that are signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are required to prepare National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans. The main goals of the CBD are the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and the equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources. The CBD stresses that stakeholder participation in developing biodiversity policy is essential for the effective implementation of the policy. It also stresses that the process of policy development is as important as the final product. The NBSAP is meant to serve as the primary vehicle for implementing the CBD at a national level.

In India, preparation of the NBSAP was undertaken in a context where government environmental plans and policies are prepared predominantly in a centralised and consultant-centric manner. Contrary to this context, the vision of the NBSAP team was to create a decentralised planning process that would result in a plan that would carry within it the priorities and aspirations of the common people of India.

The NBSAP process thus tried to include as many interest groups and sectors as possible in the planning process, such as grassroots communities, women, NGOs, activists, field-level Forest Department officials, business representatives, the armed forces, disabled individuals and students. In particular, emphasis was given to the participation of those whose livelihoods depend most on biodiversity, and who therefore have the greatest stake in its conservation.

Preparation of the NBSAP was decentralised by writing separate biodiversity action plans at four levels:

- State (in 33 states and union territories)
- Sub-state (18 selected sites in some states to create detailed local level plans)
- Eco-regional (10 eco-regions cutting across state boundaries, like Western Ghats or West Himalayas)
- Thematic (13 selected themes related to biodiversity)

A total of 71 plans were prepared across the four levels, each coordinated by a separate coordinating agency. Each plan was meant to be an independent, stand-alone document that would be directly referred to for implementation of strategies and

actions in the concerned area. Key elements from all plans were finally integrated into a single National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP).

### ***Power Tool: Interactive Radio Drama***

The coordinating agency for the state of Karnataka was the Centre for Ecological Sciences (CES), a research institute in Bangalore. An interactive radio drama was prepared jointly with All India Radio, Bangalore, and was one of several other tools used by the CES to encourage participatory planning for a biodiversity action plan for the state of Karnataka.

Fourteen weekly interactive episodes in Kannada were broadcast on Karnataka state radio over 14 weeks, covering six selected themes related to biodiversity.

### **Objective**

- To solicit information from the general public, to incorporate into the action plan.
- To raise awareness of biodiversity and create an understanding of the importance of documenting and saving it.
- To achieve the above through entertaining, interactive programmes.

### **Description**

The programmes were based on a serial dramatisation, i.e. an ongoing 'radio play' of two characters, a male and female named Ravi and Bhuvana, travelling through the state of Karnataka. In the play the characters encounter various people and situations that teach them about biodiversity and become a motive for discussing various issues related to biodiversity. Prior to the studio recording of the dramatisation, the producers of the show travelled to various parts of the state to conduct recorded interviews with people at the grassroots, regarding biodiversity in their immediate surroundings and their daily lives. The voices of the people interviewed were subsequently incorporated into the dramatisation, which was later recorded in a studio using professional actors to play the two characters. The series was designed for interaction with listeners, with requests at the end of each episode to send in information through letters. Each dramatised episode focussed on a theme, and was followed by an interview episode with experts talking about the theme of the previous episode. The first episode introduced the background and objectives of preparing the action plan. The final episode was a live phone-in programme with a panel of experts present to answer questions from listeners.

### **Producing the series**

Details of the process of producing the programmes are as follows:

#### **Interview locations:**

Field interview locations were identified with the help of the coordinating agency. There was a focus on places that had some interesting ongoing activity, as well as places that were in remote areas. For the episode on crop varieties, for instance, the producers travelled to an area where the documentation of minor millets was taking place; the dramatisation depicted the 2 characters travelling there while the harvesting is on, and interacting with various local people. Locations were also chosen based on letters received in the course of the 14 weeks, since listeners had been requested to send in

location ideas for the programme to travel to. Many listeners wrote in, inviting the producers to visit their area. Thus a major strength of the production was its flexibility. Though the 14 episodes were broadly planned in advance, the interview locations were unplanned, with the producers having the freedom to pick up new leads and travel to different locations based on interviews and letters.

#### Conducting the interviews:

In some cases written intimation of the arrival of the producers meant that 30-40 people had gathered in one spot for interviews. In other cases the producers had to wait all day to find people willing to be interviewed. Though several interviews were recorded, the selection back at the studio retained only those interviews that had clarity in terms of voice and ideas. One of the challenges was going through the hours of interviews at the editing stage to find the appropriate information – a five-minute recording required the producers to go through 3-4 hours of tapes. When the exercise was repeated for a subsequent wildlife awareness radio series (see Box: “Off-shoots of the Radio Series”), the producers minimised this challenge by speaking to potential interviewees beforehand, to ascertain whether their voices should be recorded or not, rather than recording every interview. Local language or dialects of interviewees were retained in the final episodes to maintain authenticity, with the voice being partially superimposed with Kannada. The producers were a husband and wife team, making it easier for them to travel together. The presence of a female producer helped in getting women to talk: “It is very difficult to make people talk, especially tribal people. My being a lady was of significance, especially to talk to the women there. They would be inside their huts, and would never come out. I would go inside and talk to them. I would tell them that I am also a woman, but I have come here at night to talk to you, why can’t you talk to me? I would challenge them, saying I thought tribal people are more courageous, but you are sitting inside your huts and not even coming out. Then they would talk.”

#### Dramatisation:

The dramatisations were based on the interviews recorded around the state by the producers. In a studio setting, the ‘real-life’ interviews were woven into a fictional narrative, with actors providing their voices for the characters of Ravi and Bhuvana. Information about a theme was provided through the two characters. For example, in an episode on medicinal plants the dramatisation depicted Ravi and Bhuvana travelling through the Western Ghats. Bhuvana hurts herself, and Ravi uses a medicinal plant to heal the wound. In the process, he tells her about the properties of the plant and which part of the plant he used to cure her.

On their travels the two characters would meet different people. The characters would introduce the persons and ask them various questions. The answers would be the voices of local people, which had been pre-recorded during field visits by the producers. The narrative was maintained throughout, and direct interviews that were ‘outside’ the storyline were never included.

The experiences of the producers during their field visits often provided inspiration for the dramatisation: “We developed [dramatic] situations where the interviews could be integrated into the story. For example, to record the crop variety programme we had gone to a village where harvesting was going on. We had our dinner there and spent the night there. So the same thing was introduced into the [drama] script – where the characters have their dinner and sample different varieties of food, which shows the crop variety available in the area.”

### Interactive episodes:

At the end of each episode a request was made for listeners to send in any information they may have had. For example, in the medicinal plants episode described above, listeners were told, "in your area you may also be using some plants like this, or maybe your grandparents know of such plants. Please send us a list of plants and the parts of the plants that are used, and tell us which language you are using for the names of the plants." Prizes were distributed for the 10 best letters per episode (though sometimes more than 10 letters were chosen for prizes since they were very good). The prize-winning letters were chosen on the basis of the most original or interesting information. Differences of opinion recorded during field visits were included in the dramatisation, and used as a way of generating discussion and responses from listeners: "We would take negative as well as positive views. For example regarding the rehabilitation of people living in forest areas – some forest dwellers said that they should leave the forest for their well-being. Others would say, 'we have been here for generations, why should we leave the forest, we have not spoilt it'. So we would put both versions in the programme and ask listeners what they felt. We had mixed answers – some people asked what would forest dwellers do if they left the forest? Others felt they should be provided with a city life."

### Final Phone-In:

The 14<sup>th</sup> episode was a half-hour live programme. A panel of three experts was present to answer questions from listeners. The phones were ringing long after the panellists had left, and the conclusion was that at least a one-hour phone-in was required for the culmination of such a series. The shortage of time also meant that the panellists could provide very brief answers to each question.

By the end, CES had registered 3674 people as participants in the series.

### **Publicity**

The episodes were publicised on radio 15 days before going on air, in a manner that would create curiosity in the listeners, with the two characters, Ravi and Bhuvana, introducing themselves and saying that they were going on a tour of Karnataka.

### **Listener response**

The series was very popular and greatly added value to the action plan, since radio reaches even remote areas that have no electricity, and breaks the barrier of literacy. As per All India Radio (AIR) statistics, the series was heard by 9.4 million listeners in total.

A total of 800 letters was received by AIR, some with photographs. Letters were also received from remote areas of the state. The letters were then handed over to CES for including relevant information in the action plan. Some letters had specific complaints against government departments (e.g. complaints that the forest department is engaged in cutting too many trees). Such controversial aspects were not included in the episodes, but the complaints were passed on to the concerned department independently by AIR (this is normal procedure which happens with letters received for other programmes as well).

## Strengths

- Timing of broadcasts: The series was broadcast at 7pm, a time when people are usually home and are free.
- Keeping it simple and attractive: Local folk music and songs that explained the rich diversity of the area were recorded during field interviews and included in the dramatisations. Humour and emotion were created within the dramatic situations, to make the story more attractive. Scientific jargon was avoided - the word 'biodiversity' was not introduced immediately into the programme, particularly because in Kannada it translates into a complicated word. This could have put off people, making them feel that it was a technical science programme. Thus the concept of biodiversity was introduced 'gently', within the story: "When the characters first enter the Western Ghats area an ant bites Bhuvana. She sits under a tree and drinks some water. Then she looks up and sees the number of twining plants on the tree, and the insects moving around. When she lifts a stone she sees termites underneath. She says to Ravi, in such a small area there are so many living organisms. Thus she introduces the concept by saying that when there are a number of organisms in an area it is called biodiversity, and that biodiversity is a speciality of the Western Ghats." At the end of each episode there was a recap of important points.
- Interactive episodes: The interactivity of the series and offer of prizes helped to keep listeners interested.
- Flexibility: The series was not planned rigidly; the flexibility of the producers in following new leads as and when letters came in, maximised new and interesting opportunities.
- Retaining authenticity: Incorporating the recorded voices of grassroots interviewees, and retaining local accents and dialects in the episodes gave authenticity to the series.
- Inclusion of women's voices: The presence of a woman on the team of field interviewers helped to include women's voices in the interviews, as the interviewer could approach women directly in their homes.
- State-wide coverage to remote areas: Radio breaks the barrier of literacy, and is heard even in remote areas where there is little or no electricity.

## Weaknesses

- Information management: The radio series was designed to solicit large numbers of responses, as inputs into the Karnataka action plan. A crucial element of such participatory initiatives is to have in place a system of information management to manage and organise the responses. The CES received almost 800 letters, some with photographs, in response to the radio programmes. It took 6 weeks simply to read and analyse all the letters, and try to segregate them thematically. Being a large institution with the back-up of additional manpower and resources, CES managed to absorb the load effectively, but this was nevertheless very difficult: "There were several hundred letters in response to the radio broadcasts. To read through and digest them is not easy, unless you have a well

worked out mechanism to do so. Maybe we did not digest all the information in the letters as effectively as we could have, because of the volume of letters.” The process adopted was extracting information while reading through the letters, and making entries against an informal checklist or thematic classification. Given the large volume of letters, a lesson learned was that it would have been better to conduct the exercise of reading the letters periodically, as and when they arrived. Since all the letters were collected and then read only at the end, this created a large, concentrated workload.

- Short time for phone-in: The interest generated by the series meant that the final phone-in episode was too short. The panel of experts was obliged to provide very brief answers, and many callers could not be included in the episode.

#### **Off-Shoots of the Radio Series**

There were various positive off-shoots of the radio series, beyond its use for the Karnataka action plan:

- Requests for similar programmes: While the series was ongoing, AIR (Bangalore) received a number of proposals from other institutions asking for a similar series for their own purposes. One proposal was from an NGO that wanted to create wildlife awareness in the state. This proposal was taken up by AIR soon after, done in a similar dramatised format with two characters visiting national parks around the state, over 13 episodes: “We used different characters and voices. It was a more romantic series. Some of it was recorded at night, with the sounds of the jungle. It included recordings of adivasis, forest officials, rehabilitated people, those who are waiting to be rehabilitated, those who are not interested in rehabilitation, etc.” A research institution requested a series on medicinal plants in the state, but with a dramatisation of Indian epics that include the use of medicinal plants.
- Potential of science series: The series created awareness within AIR regarding the potential of science series: “We are delighted by these [listener] statistics as a theme like biodiversity has interested so many millions of listeners. Generally for science programmes the clientele expected is small, as illiterates do not evince much interest in science programmes. Nevertheless this has truly been an unique experience for us, as well as all age and category of listeners [who] have enjoyed listening to the series.” (Letter to CES from AIR Deputy Director). AIR also realised that its science programmes can be successfully marketed: “We usually get sponsorships from government agencies like the Women’s Welfare Department. But this was the first time we got a sponsorship where the money was not coming directly from the government [but from a research institute]. After that the wildlife awareness series was the first time we got a sponsorship from an NGO.” The series for the Karnataka action plan was also the first time that AIR Bangalore had developed a radio programme as a way of collecting information and utilising it, particularly from remote areas, as opposed to being only a means of awareness and education.
- Series repeated for educational purposes: Due to the popularity of the series, AIR repeated all the episodes in an Education Branch programme, to generate more awareness on biodiversity (though the questions to listeners were deleted). This was done as a public service, without any further sponsorship from CES. (The series could also be profitably used if tapes of the programme were marketed as educational tools for schools and private use. Unfortunately there is no process within AIR to do so.)
- Appreciation: The producer of the radio series, Ms Sumangala Mummigatti, was named “Woman Who Made the City Proud” by The Hindu, a national newspaper, for helping develop environmental awareness. She was one of eight women selected for International Women’s Day in 2002.

**Resources for further information:**

- Tejaswini Apte, an independent environmental consultant (apte\_rahm@hotmail.com), has written this paper. The tool was developed jointly by the Centre for Ecological Sciences and All India Radio, Bangalore. It was one of several other tools used by the Centre to encourage participatory planning for a biodiversity action plan for the state of Karnataka, India. The action plan was part of the wider process of preparing the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) for India (2000 – 2004).
- Apte, T. 2005. *An Activist Approach to Biodiversity Planning: A handbook of participatory tools used to prepare the National Biodiversity Action Plan in India.* IIED. London, U.K.
- Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore - 560 012, Karnataka, India. Tel/Fax: +91-80-23601453. Website: <http://ces.iisc.ernet.in>
- National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan: <http://sdnp.delhi.nic.in/nbsap>