



Global Issues - Local Voices: Unlocking EK-FM's Educational Power

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Project Introduction

In the heart of Lake Victoria, Kenya's Mfangano Island is home to 30,000 people. Geographically isolated, politically marginalized and with limited infrastructure, islanders face the formidable and interrelated challenges of high HIV/AIDS rates, threatened livelihoods and environmental degradation. Yet islanders retain strong connections through shared ancestry as most descend from the Abakunta people, who emigrated 15 generations ago from Uganda. Mfangano holds the distinction of being one of the last places with native Suba speakers, one of UNESCO's endangered languages. Today, remaining Suba Elders are the "torchbearers" of a threatened culture and sadly the most at-risk community members from the emerging COVID-19 pandemic in Kenya.

Building on momentum from the ongoing NGS cultural conservation grant (NGS-50652S-18), and in partnership with the local Ekialo Kiona Radio Station (EK-FM), we intend to safeguard Suba heritage by empowering at-risk community members with accurate health information, and inspiring a new generation of Suba youth torchbearers. This partnership with EK-FM provides a two-way information conduit and an important case for understanding how local journalism engages, amplifies and fortifies local knowledge against public health. EK-FM has is a unique channel to disseminate true and accurate information about COVID-19 in a timely manner as well as cover stories of how the local community is preparing and responding to the pandemic. Radio enables journalists to gather and share local stories of community preparations and responses to the pandemic, while tackling associated concerns such as nutrition, mental health and domestic violence.

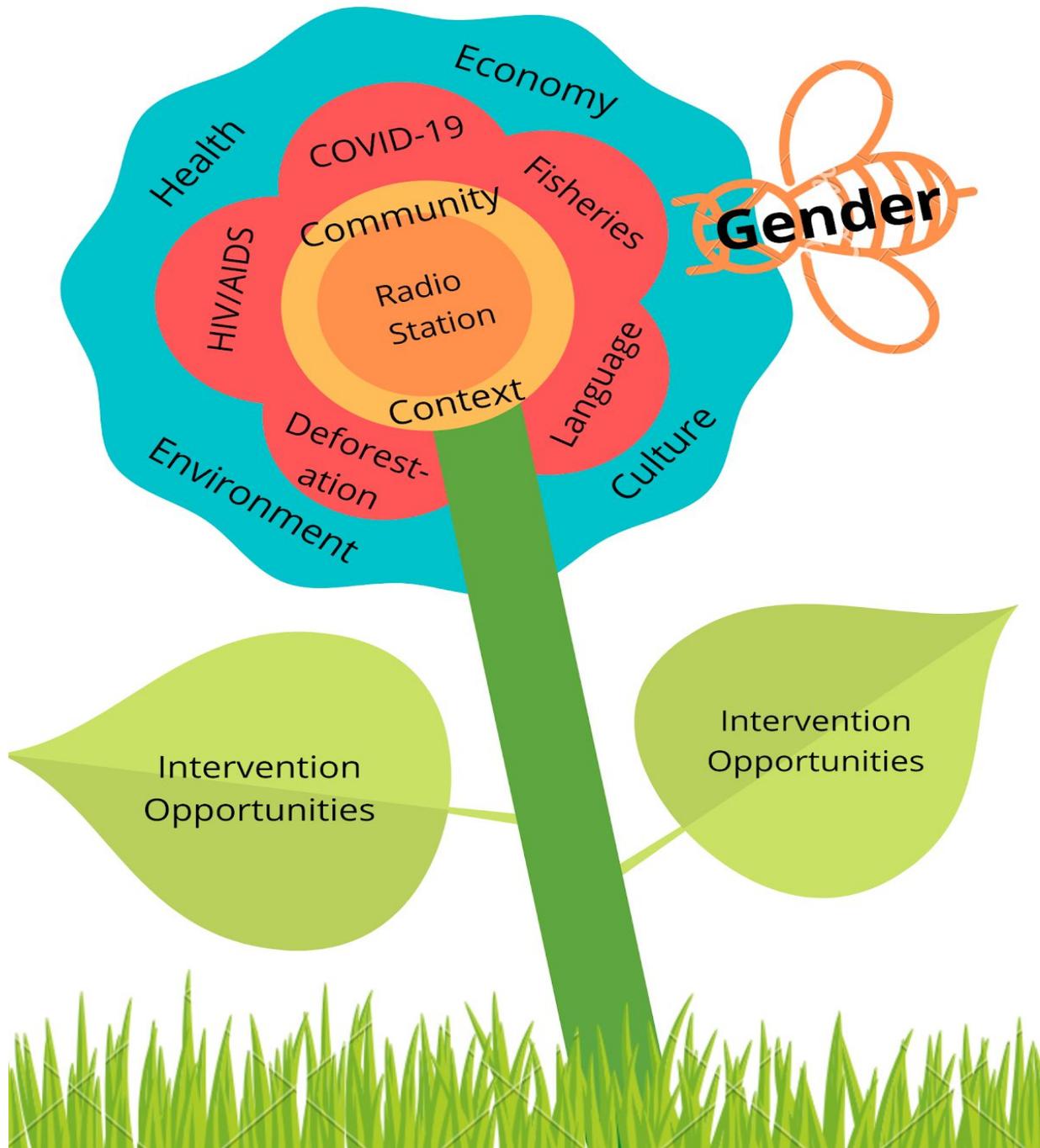
Project Background

Operated out of the Ekialo Kiona Community Center on Mfangano Island, EK-FM – 88.3 was officially launched in 2012 through a partnership between the local community and Organic Health Response. It is set to be an indigenous community radio station that's produced in Suba language and broadcast from Africa's first wind & solar-powered 500 watt FM transmitter atop Soklo mountain, reaching approximately 200,000 daily listeners over 80-km across Lake Victoria. This radio station was our targeted medium for reaching the people of Mfangano Island and disseminating this important information.

Because the radio presenters are Suba themselves and grew up on Mfangano Island, their local expertise makes the radio programming richer. More importantly, they already have the trust and respect of the community, making it easier for them to directly engage with the broadcasts and to get compliance with the health recommendations in the bulletins. That said, due to the seriousness of the pandemic and the risk it presents to the entire Mfangano community, the team put in extra efforts to reach groups that are marginalized or don't regularly access the radio station. We explored new forms of engaging listeners and attempted to find them where they are. In complying with local restrictions on unnecessary movements outside of the home, the radio presenters did not visit community members homes to conduct interviews. Instead, listeners were invited to engage with the radio station in other ways, such. Because of the number of rumors surrounding COVID-19 among the Mfangano Island community, the radio presenters used the EK-FM social media pages to gather questions from community members regarding symptoms, when and how to seek healthcare services, best practices, and Ministry of

Health recommendations. Especially as the programming moved into conversations about societal impacts, the radio presenters took the opportunity to conduct phone interviews with experts, elders, community leaders, and other individuals who can provide insight regarding the issues at hand and the local implications. Finally, listeners have been invited to call into the radio station during broadcasts either to offer their own opinions or to ask questions of the radio presenters, guests, and other listeners. In this way, EK-FM has started to engage the entire Mfangano community in rich discussions around current and future impacts of the coronavirus pandemic through its new radio program, Wanyalo Loyo Korona Kanyakla (“We Can Face Corona Together”).

Conceptual Model



Explanatory memo:

The Central Issue The Suba people living on Mfangano Island are wrestling with a number of grand challenges, between rapid deforestation and depletion of fisheries, high rates of HIV infection, and a language and culture that is at risk of extinction. In the midst of the

coronavirus pandemic, this population is extra vulnerable to the health and social impacts of this crisis. At the center of it all is the Ekialo Kiona Suba Youth Radio Station, operated by Organic Health Response. Broadcasting 10 hours per day, the radio reaches 200,000 daily listeners, creating an intervention point to address the serious issues facing the community.

The Important Elements:

Mfangano Community Context: The Mfangano community context doesn't only encompass the critical health, environmental and cultural issues the people on the island are facing, but also and more importantly understanding how the people see those issues and the relationships among them. **Community Issues:** Out of the community context are the issues that the Suba people are facing: Health (HIV/AIDS & COVID-19), Environmental (Deforestation), Cultural (Language Extinction), and Economic (Fishery Depletion).

Radio Station:

Reaching approximately 200,000 daily listeners, the Ekialo Kiona Suba Youth Radio or EK-FM is a unique channel to target the marginalization of the Abasuba people and the revitalization of their heritage and culture.

Intervention Opportunities:

These represent where there is potential for projects, programs, or other efforts that address the environmental, health, cultural, and economic issues facing the Suba people.

Gender:

The final element of the model is gender, which is not only encompassing the specific gender issues, but is also a lens used to look at all of the other issues and the proposed programming.

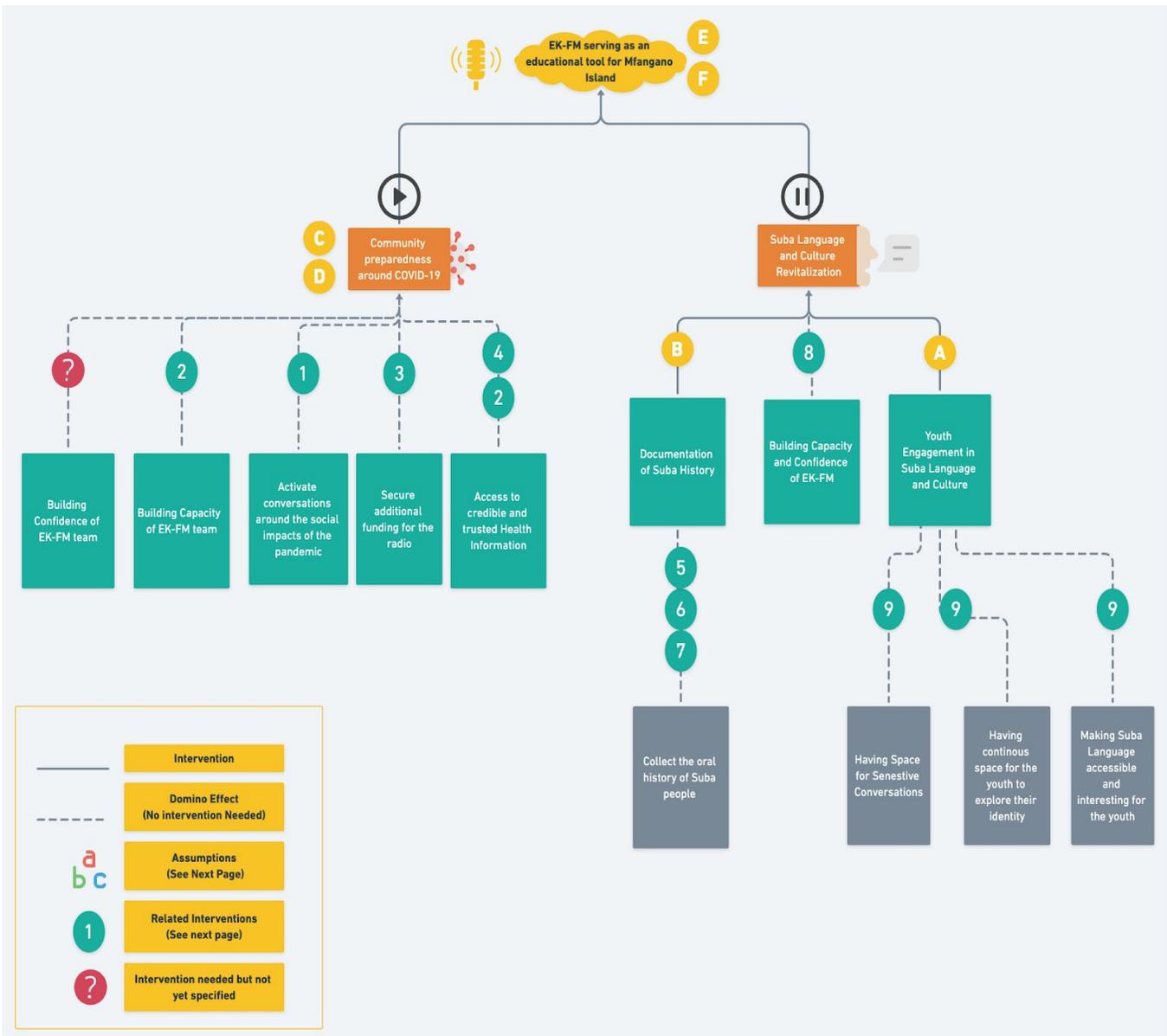
The Relationships:

This conceptual model does not incorporate arrows or show the directional relationships between the different elements of the model. However, by using the design of a flower, some of those relationships are implied in the functions of a flower in the natural world. From the stem, sprouts the leaves, taking in sunlight, carbon dioxide, and water, from the stem, to perform photosynthesis and provide food for the rest of the plant. Similarly, intervention opportunities that could support the radio program will be designed with significant input from the community to ensure the programs developed are effective in addressing the issues they are facing. The final aspect of the model is gender, which is represented by a bee. This was done to show that by adding a gender lens to how each of the issues is addressed, the effect can be enriched, or pollinated. Additionally, addressing these issues through a gender lens will improve the situation for both men and women.

Unknowns & Uncertainties:

Will the radio program be effective in eliciting community activism? Can the radio be used to address the serious issues facing the island? How can radio series be developed to be educational?

Theory of Change



Assumptions

- (A)** Youth re-engagement with their culture will lead to Suba culture and language revitalization.
- (B)** Suba culture documentation will lead to culture and language revitalization.
- (C)** The community will welcome, actively listen and engage with the content presented in the radio series.
- (D)** The National Geographic grant will secure enough funding for the project.
- (E)** The radio is the best medium to communicate with the community.
- (F)** The radio will effectively reach its targeted audience.

Interventions

- (1)** In cooperation with MDP Students, EK-FM will develop a daily show on the possible local social impacts of the pandemic on the local community.
- (2)** Providing tips for EK-FM team on ways to extract credible information
- (3)** Applying to the National Geographic Grant call for local coverage on the pandemic.
- (4)** MDP in cooperation with MPH students providing Health Bulletins to be transmitted through Ek-FM
- (5)** Developing The Suba Saga Radio Series on Suba history and podcast template.
- (6)** Producing a documentary that tells the story of the Suba People.
- (7)** Publishing the National Geographic Article on Suba history.
- (8)** Partnering with Mass Communication students from the University of Maseno to hold workshops and trainings for EK-FM radio team.
- (9)** Partnering with University of Minnesota students to hold workshops and training for EK-Fm radio team on curriculum development.

Project Implementation

As with most things around the world, the Global Issues, Local Voices project had to pivot quickly in response to the coronavirus pandemic. What started out as a culture revitalization project soon turned into a COVID-19 community preparedness talk show. So far the radio program, called Wanyalo Loyo Korona Kanyakla (We Can Face Corona Together), has covered the following topics: COVID-101, Mental Health and Stigma, Domestic Violence, and Comorbidities and Protecting Our Vulnerable Populations. In the upcoming topics, the radio presenters plan to address Home-Based Care and Health and Safety of Children.

The talk show was designed to cover one overarching topic over the course of five episodes: The Overview, The Expert Take, Burning Questions, Call-In Hour, and Words into Actions. Each episode allows the radio presenters and listeners to consider the topic of the week from different perspectives, while brainstorming action steps they can take as a community to address any related challenges.

The Overview provides a basic understanding of whatever the topic is, with a worldwide as well as a more local context included as a part of the conversation. The Expert Take episode brought in a professional working in the field related to the topic at hand for an interview with the radio presenter. With this episode, radio presenters and listeners are able to dig into the topic a bit more, while accessing reliable information directly from the expert. These experts have often been a representative from the Kenyan Ministry of Health who work in the Mfangano Island area. The next episode, Burning Questions, gives listeners the opportunity to submit their own questions related to the topic of the week. During this episode, another expert is on hand to assist with answering these questions and ensure that listeners are receiving accurate information. For these episodes, the guest has frequently been a Masters of Public Health student from Maseno University who has traveled to EK-FM from Kisumu in order to be present. The Call-In Hour is focused around the experiences, stories, ideas, and thoughts of EK-FM's listeners as they call into the radio station to share live on air. Again in order to prevent the spread of rumors and myths throughout the community, a local professional participates in this episode as well, often coming from Organic Health Response's Health Navigator Team. Finally, the last episode of the week allows the radio presenters and listeners to bring it all together and determine what it all means for them as a community, while coming up with action steps they can take together.

In order to ensure the content in the radio bulletins are factual, they were developed by a diverse team made up of Organic Health Response Staff Members, Masters of Public Health Students from both the University of Minnesota and Maseno University in Kenya, Masters of Development Practice Students from the University of Minnesota, and radio presenters at EK-FM Radio Station. The Masters of Development Practice (MDP) students were the primary authors of the first three topics, with input and feedback from the other team members. However, in an attempt to encourage sustainability of the program and further build the capacity of the radio presenters, the MDP students virtually trained six radio presenters on how to develop radio content, find reliable resources, and create engaging graphics for social media. Following the completion of this training, the radio presenters then began developing the content for Topic 4 with strong support and guidance from the MDP students and the rest of the project team.

The content is shared as a radio broadcast in the vernacular language, which is a mixture of Suba, DhoLuo, and English. While they are not the target population, the station is able to reach communities living on other nearby islands and on the mainland as well, extending the impact EK-FM is able to have with this project past the island. As the radio program moves forward, the radio presenters are considering offering summarized versions of each topic in Swahili and English in order to better reach the communities listening in from off the island. Through weekly virtual meetings, held via Zoom, the MDP students, the Maseno MPH student, and the EK-FM station manager were able to interact directly with the radio presenters offering guidance, training, and clarification on the content. More importantly, the team was able to get invaluable insight from the radio presenters based on what they were experiencing on the ground, while hosting the show, the feedback they were getting from listeners, and expertise they have related to radio programming. In this way, we were able to ensure that all content is culturally relevant and appropriate not just to Kenyan culture, but specifically the Suba culture.

Project Challenges

Implementing any development project is going to bring about challenges, no matter the situation. But navigating this project virtually, without ever having the opportunity to visit Mfangano Island or the EK-FM radio station and to meet the Kenyan team members proved to be extra challenging. One of the most important parts of a successful project is building rapport as a team and learning one another's strengths. This is more difficult to do when working remotely and while struggling through technological issues. The MDP team was incredibly fortunate to have weekly contact with at least a few of the radio team via Zoom. This allowed space for the team to get to know each other a bit and for the MDP students to provide direct support to the presenters, rather than relying on the radio manager to act as the liaison. That said, the technology access that radio presenters had varied greatly, with some presenters having only a basic cell phone, while others had a smartphone or even their own laptop. This meant that engagement levels varied between radio presenters depending on their technology access and put extra pressure on those who were well connected to relay information amongst the team. In addition, the remote team struggled to keep the team motivated throughout the entirety of the project, particularly as the radio presenters began to take over the content development. Without being physically present on the island, it was challenging to maintain motivation levels and establish accountability within the team. With the time differences and lack of direct contact, it became much easier for presenters to send materials late or focus on other projects.

Aside from technology constraints, the project grappled with some financial constraints too. This project necessitated the radio presenters to put in extra time for training and content development. The MDP students, with support from the Organic Health Response leadership, submitted a National Geographic COVID-19 Response Grant to provide extra funding for this project, but unfortunately, was not awarded the funds. For this reason, the team was unable to increase the stipend that radio presenters receive to reflect this extra time and work. The team was also unable to supply the radio presenters with the technology needed to support their work. This undoubtedly impacted the level of motivation and engagement of the radio presenters and exacerbated these challenges.

Insights and Conclusion

The situation the development field has found itself in as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic certainly presents some barriers and challenges, but could also facilitate stronger indigenous collaboration. In the case of this project, the MDP students were unable to travel to Mfangano Island themselves due to travel restrictions, which required local staff to step up as leaders of this project. This may not have been the case had the students been at the radio station in person. As a result, we, as development practitioners, were able to truly play a role of strictly being a resource and support to the local team. We provided our expertise in Development Practice and Content Development as well as sharing our perspective as outsiders, but ultimately leadership and implementation came from the local presenters themselves. This process of remote cross-cultural and international collaboration could push projects throughout the development sector to become more sustainable and require stronger local ownership, which will ultimately result in more impactful work.

Our main conclusions from this project:

- Cultural competencies are more difficult to learn and understand over virtual platforms. Patience and compromise may be even more essential when working remotely.
- Local staff or participants in development projects should be outfitted with the necessary resources and technology to ensure full engagement in the project.
- Local staff and participants offer invaluable insight and expertise that can be used to inform the project, but this information can be more difficult to access virtually if the technology and infrastructure is not there to support this collaboration.
- Projects should ensure there is enough funding for appropriate compensation of local staff that takes into consideration the amount of expertise they bring and the extra barriers they may face.
- Identifying a local leader of the project is essential, when working via virtual platforms. If no one volunteers at the beginning of the project, it is likely that one will naturally arise through the process of implementing said project.