

Radios for Guns

To a person in Niger, does a radio that does not require batteries mean more than a gun? The Freeplay Foundation is betting that it will.

The Freeplay Foundation has entered into a formal partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the government of Niger for a unique new project aimed at encouraging Nigerienes to exchange illicit guns for a Freeplay radio in an initiative called Radios for the Consolidation of Peace (RCP). Colonel Mai Moctar Kassouma, president of the National Commission for the Collection and Control of Illicit Small Arms, Steven Ursino of the UNDP and Kristine Pearson, executive director of the Freeplay Foundation, who formally launched the project are planning for the project to begin operations soon.

The Freeplay Foundation donated 12,445 Freeplay radios to the government which combine six different models, returned to the Freeplay Energy Group, makers of the radios, under the company's warranty scheme. The Freeplay Energy Group gave them to the Freeplay Foundation to use in a humanitarian project of their choice.

While many of the radios are in good working condition, others are broken and can either be repaired or used for spare parts. They are due to arrive in Niamey soon and immediately thereafter a Freeplay technician will travel to Niger to set up a factory facility and begin training Nigerienes in the inspection and reconditioning of the radios. The initiative will thus also include a job creation component. Trainees will include youth associated with a community radio station in Niamey called Radio Goudel and women offenders released from prison by the Minister of Justice within the framework of the government's pilot initiative for the social rehabilitation of former prisoners. The National Commission for the Collection and Control of Illicit Arms will coordinate the distribution of the radios to rural communities in the Diffa region, where rebellion flared in the 1990s, as well as manage the collection and decommissioning of the guns.

Community Radio in Niger

The radios are aimed at strengthening the capacity of Niger's vibrant and proliferating community radio network, called the Rural Radio Network and Information Centres for Development.

Within the next couple of years there are expected to be 160 solar powered community radio stations in Niger. Almost 20 are already operational in various provinces. In the Diffa region, radio broadcasts will inform communities about the need to collect and destroy weapons.

Niger Peace Accords

Radios for the Consolidation of Peace falls under the internationally funded Niger Peace Accords in response to the Tuareg and Toubou rebellions that rocked the country during the 1990's. Although peace accords have been signed and the government is actively promoting an environment of peace and stability, small arms are still prevalent and poverty is endemic. Niger ranks 161 out of 162 selected countries on the UNDP's 2001 Human Development Report. This initiative also forms a part of the UNDP's poverty reduction strategy. Illicit guns are a constant threat to stability, security and peace in Niger.

Conclusion

With community radio stations broadcasting news, weather, local debates and educational programmes in vernacular languages, the intrinsic value of information increases accordingly. However, there is the inevitable question of whether or not people will actually surrender their guns. All parties concerned are working on an expectation that because Freeplay radios are an aspirational, high value asset for people in a country like Niger, people will elect to exchange their guns for a radio.

More information:

Radio Netherlands has published lab tests of the Global Shortwave radio and more:

www.rnw.nl/realradio/freeplaygsw.html

www.rnw.nl/realradio/baygen.html

For further enquiries:

kmoore@freeplayfoundation.org