Goats and Soda

THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

Who Do People Trust For Coronavirus Info? In Zambia, It's Nuns On The Radio

June 4, 2020 · 8:01 AM ET

PRANAV BASKAR

Sister Astridah Banda produces a live radio show called "COVID-19 Awareness Program" in Zambia to share crucial information about the coronavirus in local languages.

Banda Jeremiah

GOATS AND SODA

COMIC: Looking For A 'Helper' In The Age Of Coronavirus

GOATS AND SODA

Indian Teen Bikes 700 Miles With Injured Dad, Is Hailed As Hero — And Sparks Debate

A nun in headphones is on the radio — offering expectant families advice for stimulating fetal development.

"Tell the husband to pat [your] tummy," she laughs. "And speak to the [baby]!"

When Sister Astridah Banda, a Catholic nun and social worker in Zambia, first went on the air, she recalls that people were jolted by her manner. "People are always surprised to see sisters can joke," she says. "They think you're always serious and praying – and in such instances, I look at myself and say 'Madame, you and I are one and the same."

And now she's branching out in her subject matter with a show she started in March — the "COVID-19 Awareness Programme."

The many languages of her homeland are what inspired the 36-year-old to start the program.

COVID-19 struck the nation in March, and the case mark passed the 1,000 in late May, with 7 recorded deaths to date – though some researchers say those figures are likely undercounts.

Much of the vital health information surrounding the disease was being shared English, says Banda, who lives in the capital city of Lusaka.

While English is Zambia's official language, many citizens speak a dialect from the Bantu family. And there are over 70 languages spoken across the nation.

That made it challenging to convey public health messages to the country's 17 million

citizens, even basic pandemic guidelines like wearing masks, washing hands frequently and following stay-at-home orders.

So Banda hatched a plan. She'd host a live radio show to share information about the novel coronavirus in local languages.

Since the first program aired in May, she's coordinated two more 30-minute radio shows about the virus, its transmission and how people can stay safe – answering a slew of listener questions:

How do I maintain best best practices when traveling to the marketplace to buy bread? (Stay distant, wear a mask and ration your trips.)

If I'm coughing, should I travel to the hospital, or wait for community health workers to come to me? (Wait for a home visit: It limits the risk of spread.)

Why do grocery stores keep measuring my temperature before I walk in? (To screen for the virus and avoid transmission.)

Banda made her radio debut in 2014. She and her community of nuns spearheaded a program to deliver key messages on maternal health and early childhood development. Unlike other forms of media, radio has the ability to reach underserved populations, Banda says, especially in rural places, where television and the internet may not be accessible.

"[Radio] has an audience that is usually left behind," says Banda.

With funding from the international aid group Catholic Relief Services, she purchased airtime at Radio Maria: Yatsani Voice, a Christian radio station in Lusaka. It didn't cost much, she says — 500 kwacha, or around $28, for a 15-minute time slot.

A global aid group called Alight, which works with a network of over 700,000 Catholic nuns around the world to fight COVID-19 in their communities, helped provide Banda with information to share on her show. That included how to properly wash hands, the importance of wearing masks and staying socially distant during the outbreak.

The show also tackles other pandemic-related issues: for example, ways the coronavirus is affecting child nutrition and maternal health, and why citizens should maintain routine health checkups and vaccinations.

But the show wasn't purely informational.

"It didn't feel like you were on radio or being interviewed," she says, "It was an informal interaction, replying freely to the moderator and laughing. It's just like talking to a friend, I always tell myself."

Banda, who organizes and produces each show, says the program is kind of like a "talk show."

Each episode features a moderator, from the radio station staff, and three panelists, who are mostly nuns from an organization she's a part of, the Association of Sisters in Zambia. Guided by the moderator, each panelist presents information on a certain aspect of the virus, and the conversation would "flow" from there, says Banda.

"I felt free," she says of her easygoing style.

Each panelist speaks a designated language for the duration of the program, repeating any essential information that prior speakers mentioned in their language. So the show is a multilingual conversation.

For example: If one panelist presented a fact in Ila, the next would translate the key point to their language — perhaps, Bemba. Banda says because the panelists can understand each other, leapfrogging from language to language in this manner wasn't difficult. As for audience members, she says people simply followed along with the languages they understood.

The program has featured seven languages — including Nsenga and Chewa, among others. And listeners seem to like it. Banda was astonished by the torrent of call-ins.

"People were calling in to tell us, 'Sister, we are happy you are using a language we can finally understand," she says. "Even before lines could be opened, people were calling in. We had to say, 'Please hold on.'"

Listeners shared stories of the best practices implemented in their communities and summarized the main points made by the panelists – joking and riffing with the hosts along the way. Asked if she was ever nervous or stumped by a question, Banda says, "not really."

Banda recalls one instance of a woman who called in, confused about why store owners were so insistent on her washing her hands before entering even if she just had shortly before. Once the caller heard how critical it is to wash hands to prevent infection, she's become something of a public health cop. When she rides on public transit and elsewhere, she encourages people to wash their hands.

To fortify ties with her audience, Banda and her team added fun features. The first five callers win liquid soap and face masks funded by Alight.

Glen Nowak, director of the Center for Health and Risk Communication and a professor of advertising at the University of Georgia, says radio with its broad reach in low-income countries is critical in health crises like this one.

"It's a terrific approach," he says of Banda's initiative. "She's trying to provide information about not just what they need to know but also what they want to know. She's able to tailor the issues she's talking about to their issues and needs – and that makes people want to take the advice"

Banda says the radio station has an estimated reach of 1.5 million people, with audiences in the Eastern, Central, Luapula and Copperbelt provinces of Zambia.

She hopes to expand the radio program into all regions of the country by convincing additional stations across the country to air it.

Alight is behind her, hoping to export a similar model to Banda's in its regional efforts across Africa.

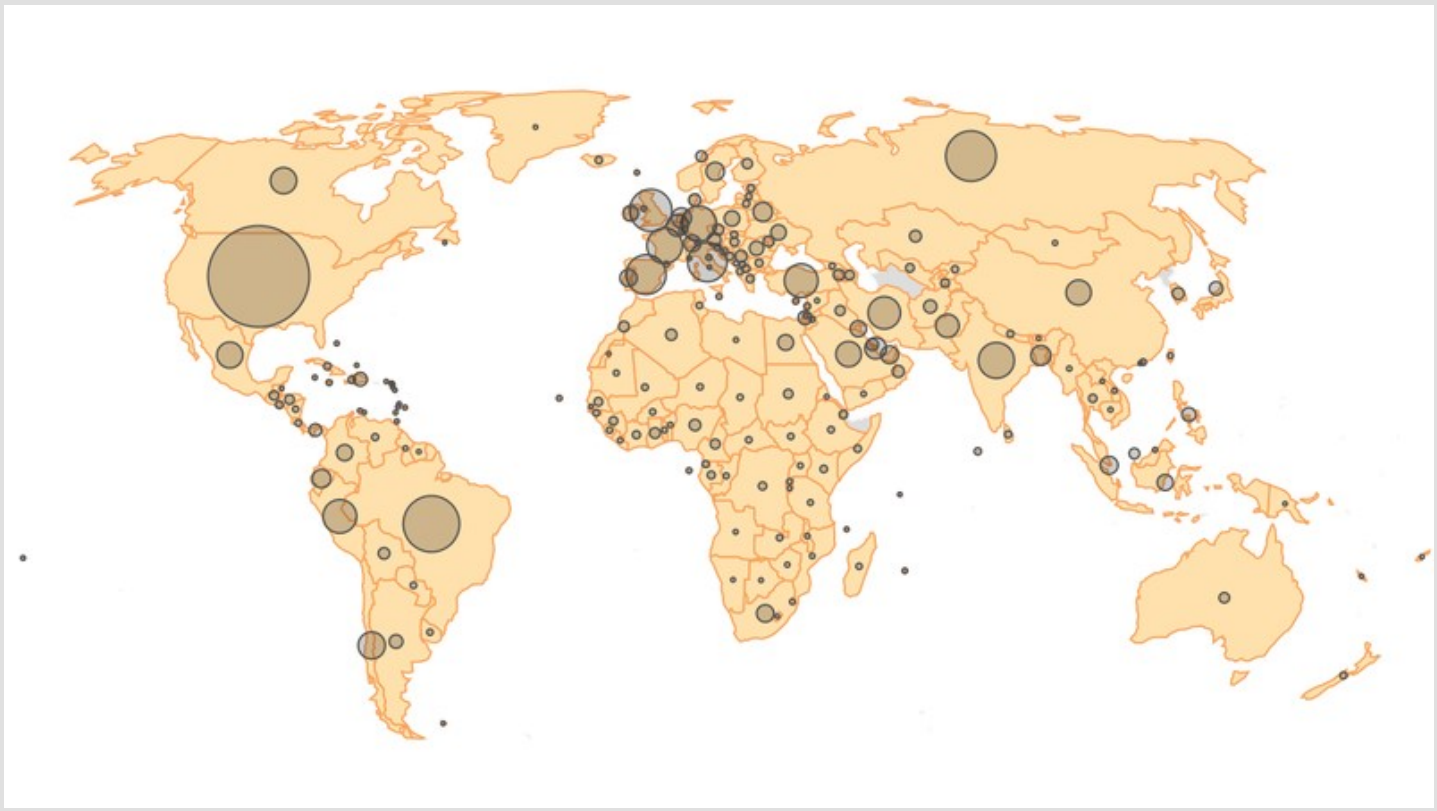
"We've actually had some sisters in Uganda start radio programs as well," says Stephanie Koehne, who works on Alight's initiatives with nuns in Africa. People trust nuns, she says, and "I'm seeing the radio really serve as a key place for [sisters] to

spread their messages, for them to really be able to reach massive amounts of people. Our ultimate goal is work with sisters across Africa to figure out how to activate radio."

Banda wants to keep tapping into this power. "I want people to know that we Sisters are a force to reckon with."

covid-19 nuns zambia pandemic coronavirus radio

More Stories From NPR



GLOBAL HEALTH

Coronavirus World Map: Tracking The Spread Of The Outbreak

RACE

Popular on NPR.org

POLITICS

Colin Powell Says He's Voting For Biden

RACE

NPR Editors' Picks

POLITICS

Trump's Response To Coronavirus, Race Has Put Him In A Hole For Reelection

HEALTH

Goats and Soda

READ & LISTEN

Home

News

Arts & Life

Music

Podcasts

Programs

CONNECT

Newsletters

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Contact

Help

ABOUT NPR

Overview

Finances

People

Press

Public Editor

Corrections

GET INVOLVED

Support Public Radio

Sponsor NPR

NPR Careers

NPR Shop

NPR Events

Visit NPR

terms of use

privacy

your privacy choices

text only