

# A Journalistic Road Map

The request seemed straightforward: "Draw me a map of your community." Trainer Shepi Mati was standing before a group of community radio reporters who had gathered in South Africa for a week-long workshop. His map-making request sounded like an easy exercise. The journalists grabbed multicolored markers and flipchart paper, and they settled in for the assignment.

But nobody began to draw. There was mumbling. What exactly did Mati want? A road map so that he could visit their radio station? A political map showing the boundaries of their township? A coverage map showing the neighborhoods reached by the station's transmitter? Suddenly the task seemed anything but simple. Mati was holding back a mischievous smile.

"Show me the elements that are involved in your community," he offered. "But let me not define what a map is. It's up to you. You need to think about your preconceptions of what a map should be."

The community-mapping initiative was developed by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), where Mati produces a weekly program syndicated on 50 radio stations.

Borrowing a concept from the Pew Foundation's civic-journalism project in the United States, Idasa has developed an innovative tool to improve radio news coverage in Africa.

"Community-radio journalists are eager to work and [are] keen about their jobs," according to Idasa's training manual, developed by the group's radio-project director, Brett Davidson. "But in many cases [reporters are] not clear what kind of news they should be



reporting, where to find it, and how to report it."

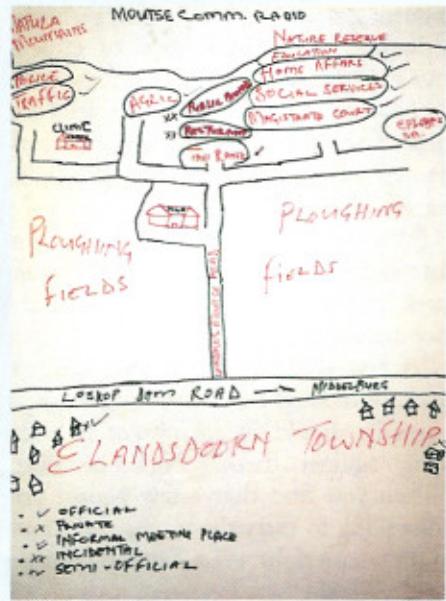
The goal of map making is to get reporters to think about new ways of covering the issues that affect daily life. It's quite a challenge: In South Africa, the rising unemployment and falling incomes of urban blacks continue to build pressure for meaningful economic reform. A recent university study found that black-household income has fallen 19 percent since the end of apartheid, while white-household income has risen by 15 percent. Two-thirds of black-township households don't have adequate family nutrition. Three-quarters of these families live below the official poverty line of \$42 per month. The official unemployment rate now stands at about 30 percent, double the rate in 1994 when Nelson Mandela was elected in the nation's first democratic



vote. And crime continues to plague the nation. South Africa has the world's highest reported incidence of rape. Even the police are frightened. They're hiring private security firms to protect police stations.

Add to that the AIDS crisis, the pandemic that is crippling the country. The World Bank has warned that AIDS could cause the nation's economy to collapse. South Africa has the world's largest HIV-positive population. Roughly 600 people die of AIDS-related diseases every day.

Community-radio reporters, many of them with little or no formal journalism training, find themselves lost in this torrent of complex social trends. Many simply resort to regurgitating crime and scandal headlines from the



morning newspapers. Idasa's community-mapping initiative is attempting to "put the community back into community-radio news." The group aims to foster greater grassroots dialogue in South Africa's ongoing struggle to provide a better life for all.

Mati moved from reporter to reporter in the workshop, watching as they worked at determining the most important elements of their communities and how to portray them on paper. When they completed the task, they tacked their maps onto the wall. The portrayals were strikingly different. Some focused on official dimensions such as police stations, schools and other government buildings. Others stressed racial or language groupings. Some reporters drew elaborate diagrams of township life. Others were clearly not in touch with their surroundings.

"A map is a way of seeing the big picture," Mati explained as the group moved from map to map, like visitors to an art gallery. "But it is also a way of seeing connections between things," he continued. "Is your station in the center of the map, with the community surrounding you? Or do you draw the station off to the edge of the page, as an outsider in a huge community?"

Map making was just the beginning of a half-day community-awareness module for township radio reporters. Mati also asked participants to think about the people their stations tend to quote in news stories. "The idea, as we dig deeper into our communities, is for

us to get beyond official and semi-official sources. If we focus only on them, we won't get the depth that we need to understand the communities we serve. We want our news agenda to be determined by all layers of life."

Finally, he asked if anyone in the room knew South African President Thabo Mbeki. Everyone laughed. "Do you know anyone who knows the president?" he asked. More laughs. "How about someone who knows someone who knows the president?" The group began to wonder. "Do you know your local priest, who knows the archbishop, who knows the president?" Heads began to nod in recognition. A look of satisfaction came into the faces of the young reporters.

"This is how you get through to people," Mati concluded. He advised the workshop participants, when they returned to their newsrooms after the session, to chart the informal and private layers of life in their communities, and then make a map of their friends. "These are the contacts you use to do your programs."

Journalism workshops always stress the importance of building a broad base of sources. But inexperienced reporters are often left wondering exactly how to get started. Idasa's map-making project is providing a vitally needed tool for South Africa's emerging township-radio press corps—a step-by-step road map that reporters can use to improve the quality of community-oriented journalism.