

Policy Brief

Youth Radio in Madagascar: An Experiment to Measure the Effects of Studio Sifaka

Context

Youth constitute majorities of the population in many countries in the global South, yet many remain disengaged from, cynical about, and uninformed regarding political issues and civic life.

In Madagascar, electoral cycles have frequently been marked by social unrest, including violence, demonstrations, and strikes. Media have fanned these flames, as many prominent outlets are owned by politicians. Malagasy youth have largely responded by withdrawing from civic life. In a 2018 nationally representative survey conducted by Afrobarometer, respondents under twenty-five were significantly less likely than their older counterparts to say they discuss politics, believe elected officials listen to constituents, or support democracy. Youth are particularly important to Madagascar's future, given that 60% of the population is under twenty-five. This youth bulge represents tremendous opportunities for economic growth and vibrant citizenship, as young Malagasy are relatively well-educated and technologically savvy. However, if denied access to policy-making and economic opportunities, they could become more disengaged, or vulnerable to polarizing messages.

Recognizing these opportunities and challenges, the United Nations in Madagascar, in collaboration with the Switzerland-based civil society organization (CSO) Fondation Hironnelleⁱ, launched Studio Sifakaⁱⁱ to provide non-partisan information and engage Malagasy youth. Radio remains the most commonly used mass medium for news and information among that demographic.

At the time of this research project, Studio Sifaka produced about two hours of daily radio programming, including national and regional news bulletins, a talk show designed to encourage dialogue (i.e. *Débat des Jeunes*), and question-and-answer sessions with key figures, among other programs. Programming content focused on politics, health, employment, culture, and other topics relevant to youth, with programs broadcast on a network of twenty-eight partner radio stations and over mobile phones.

Studio Sifaka was designed to increase youth political engagement, efficacy, knowledge, support for democratic norms, and tolerance of salient out-groups. Its theory of change held that the availability and consumption of high-quality and credible information by youth will 1) encourage inclusive dialogue between differing communities, 2) help youth better understand their political context, including issues related to the democratic process, and points of view held by different stakeholders and interest groups, and 3) help youth see that their perspectives and concerns are given a voice and that dialogue between those with different points of view is possible. These changes should result in youth 1) having a greater sense of agency in the democratic process, 2) being more willing to engage in intergroup dialogue, and 3) experiencing overall decreases in sense of political marginalization and increases in peaceful coexistence with members of other communities.

A centerpiece of Studio Sifaka's efforts is *Débat des Jeunes*, a dialogue program that bring together political leaders, CSO representatives, and other community members to discuss important political and civic issues. Although the program sometimes focuses on controversial issues, the moderated discussions are designed to be respectful and even-handed. The program broadcast for fifteen minutes every day on Sifaka partners. This evaluation focused on estimating the short-term effects of regular exposure to *Débat des Jeunes*.

Key findings

- There is strong evidence that *Débat des Jeunes* was effective at meeting many of its stated goals. Specifically, in an experimental study, those who listened more to *Débat des Jeunes* (in comparison to a placebo program) were
 - More likely to report discussing politics
 - More likely to report attending community meetings
 - More likely to support inclusive dialogue to solve problems
 - More likely to support decision-making based on group discussion
 - More likely to support pluralism in Madagascar's media sector

- More likely to say that they felt empowered to change politics (i.e. internal efficacy)
- More likely to say that leaders would listen to people like them (i.e. external efficacy)
- More likely to say that freedom of speech is enjoyed in Madagascar, and
- More likely to reject cheating in elections as a political strategy
- However, counter to project goals, those who listened more to *Débat des Jeunes* (in comparison to a placebo program) were
 - More likely to identify with their ethnic group over being Malagasy, and
- Listening to *Débat des Jeunes* seems to have had no effect on
 - Support for violence, or
 - Political polarization

Research questions

Given the goals of the Sifaka project, the evaluation was designed to measure the effects of exposure to *Débat des Jeunes* in five main areas:

- **Political engagement**, or the extent to which Malagasy youth participate in politics, through everyday activities like 1) discussion with others and 2) attendance at organized events, like community meetings.
- **Support for inclusion and dialogue**, or agreement with principles that politics works best when broad and diverse voices are included in discussion and decision-making. Measured by 1) recommended strategy—dialogue or top-down edicts—for addressing hypothetical disagreement over location of a new borehole in a village, 2) recommended solution—discussion or separation—for dealing with inter-group disputes, and 3) support for pluralism in Malagasy mass media. In a related but distinct measure, the project also sought to measure the extent to which youth see themselves as Malagasy (i.e. identification with the nation).
- **Perceptions of efficacy**, or 1) individual beliefs in their own ability to affect political change (internal efficacy), and 2) individual sense that the political system and actors within it (e.g. the government) will be responsive to citizens’ demands (external efficacy). In a related but distinct measure, the project also sought to measure 3) the extent to which youth believe that their ability to speak freely is protected in Madagascar.
- **Attitudinal moderation**, or the extent to which individuals hold extreme positions on political topics, thus contributing to polarization. Measured through difference in individuals’ ratings of two political leaders on opposite sides of the spectrum.
- **Support for democratic norms**, measured through the extent to which individuals 1) support cheating in order to win elections, and 2) whether they think violence is justified under various scenarios.

Methodological summary

Given the challenges of measuring effects of media-based programs through observational data, such as those collected through traditional surveys, we designed and administered a symmetric encouragement field experiment. Experimental designs allow researchers to determine who gets access to certain treatments—in this case, exposure to certain Sifaka programming—and who does not. If sample sizes are large enough, random assignment into conditions will mean that, statistically speaking, subject groups are likely statistically equivalent in every way except for their (non-)exposure to the treatment. Thus, any differences observed post-treatment between groups can logically only be attributable to the treatment. Self-selection, which we know determines media consumption in the real world, cannot be an explanation.

Symmetric encouragement designs are versions of field experiments that can be conducted to study media effects. It is challenging in real-world settings to artificially dictate who can and cannot access certain media programming; however, we can encourage individuals, through adequate incentives, to access certain programming (e.g. a treatment of interest) while simultaneously encourage others, through similar incentives, to access an alternate program (e.g. a placebo group). Ideally, the

study should be structured such that, during the study period, individuals in the treatment do not access the placebo, and vice versa. This allows a “clean” comparison between the two groups.

This evaluation was conducted by encouraging a random subset of study participants to listen to *Débat des Jeunes* (i.e. the treatment) during a specified period, while using similar incentives to encourage another subset to listen to a placebo program. The placebo program in this case was Sifaka’s public health-focused *Santé Nakà*. While we theorized that listening to *Débat des Jeunes* would affect the outcomes of interest, we similarly expected that listening to *Santé Nakà* would have no such effects.

We used Viamo’s 3-2-1, a phone-based informational service partnering with Sifaka, to recruit participants and administer treatments. Randomized invitations were sent, via automated phone calls, to 3-2-1’s pool of over 800,000 registered Malagasy phone numbers; quotas were set to achieve nationally representative samples on the basis of *faritra* (region) and gender. Due to Sifaka’s focus, only those identified as being between 18 and 34 years of age were eligible. Those who consented to participate ($N=7057$) completed a baseline survey, which collected data on the outcomes of interest using a standardized questionnaire. Participants were remunerated with 2500 ariary (~\$0.67 US) in airtime. Figure 1 shows the distribution of participants, by *faritra*, throughout Madagascar.

Next, half of the participants were randomly invited to listen to *Débat des Jeunes* (i.e. the treatment) ($n=3523$), while half were invited to *Santé Nakà* (i.e. the placebo) ($n=3534$). Statistical tests show that, on a range of demographic characteristics, the two groups were, on average, indistinguishable from one another. Those who completed the survey were told that they would have weekly opportunities to earn airtime by listening to an assigned program and correctly answering questions about program content. Each week during the six-week study period, participants received automated voice messages encouraging them to call the 3-2-1 service, which was free, before a deadline to listen to a ten-minute version of their assigned program. Participants could call at their convenience anytime during the week. After listening to their program, they would then automatically hear four quiz questions, which focused on the content of the program. If they answered two of the four multiple-choice questions correctly, they would receive 2500 ariary (~\$0.67 US) in airtime. These prizes were offered to incentivize individuals to listen to their assigned program. These weekly opportunities continued for six weeks.

At the end of the six-week period, participants were invited to complete an endline survey, which was identical to baseline; participation was remunerated with 3000 ariary (~\$0.80 US) in airtime. 57.0% ($n=4017$) of those who completed the baseline also completed the endline. The study took place between November 2020 and June 2021. Figure 2 shows the study design.

The effects of listening to *Débat des Jeunes* versus *Santé Nakà* were measured with difference-in-differences analysis, by comparing changes that occurred between baseline and endline within the treatment group to changes occurring over the same period in the placebo. Any difference in changes can be attributable to treatment assignment.

Results

We find that, on many of our outcome measures, there are statistically significant differences in average responses between baseline and endline. For example, subjects reported increases in political engagement, by being more likely to say they discuss politics and attend community meetings at endline than at baseline. However, in twelve of the thirteen outcomes, the difference in differences was not statistically significant. (The exception was in the identity outcome, where subjects in the treatment moved much more in the direction of identifying with their ethnic group than with the Malagasy nation than those in the placebo did.) In other words, any average changes between baseline and endline in the treatment arm were not statistically distinguishable from changes over the same period in the placebo arm. Thus, in these cases, there might have been changes occurring in Madagascar more broadly—or among Malagasy youth, more specifically—that affected both subject groups roughly equally. The lack of significance here might suggest the treatment had no effect on outcomes of interest.

However, those analyses have a major limitation. Namely, the simply compared individuals based on treatment assignment. Many of the subjects did not comply with their treatment assignment; in other words, they do not seem to have completely weekly listening tasks, as instructed. For example, 29% of the subjects never attempted a single weekly quiz, while 67% did so between one and five times. Only 15% did so every week. Thus, we perhaps should not be surprised to find null effects when looking at all subjects; many were, essentially, either not participating or receiving very low “dosages.” This is

a common issue with encouragement designs and other field experiments, where the researcher certainly cannot enforce compliance with designated tasks.

One solution is to consider actual exposure when estimating effects. This is not necessarily ideal from an evaluation standpoint, since subjects self-select whether or not to comply; this could therefore introduce bias. Still, factoring in actual dosage received is important when measuring treatment effects.

Here, when we consider compliance in our analyses, we consistently see statistically significant effects, and usually in the expected direction. First, those who were assigned to and actually listened to *Débat des Jeunes* (as measured by quiz attempts and actual correct responses) saw larger gains in political engagement than those who assigned to *Santé Nakà*. Higher treatment dosage also led to significantly larger increases in support for dialogue and inclusion, higher internal and external efficacy, improved evaluations of speech freedoms in Madagascar, and larger increases in rejection of cheating as an election strategy. There were no detected treatment effects for support for violence or political polarization. Finally, we again see that, surprisingly, those who were assigned to the treatment saw larger decreases in identification with the Malagasy nation—and, thus, larger increases in identification with their own ethnic group—than those in the placebo group did, even after factoring in actual dosage received. Although we do not have evidence in support of a particular explanation for this unexpected finding, several interviewees during follow-up fieldwork in Antananarivo suggested several mechanisms, ranging from discussion programs’ featuring of diverse Malagasy speaking different dialects highlighting inter-ethnic differences to discussions featuring people with various perspectives on topics highlighting difference, rather than similarity.

Overall, though, the evidence from the second set of analyses is strongly in favor of *Débat des Jeunes* having significant and positive effects, in line with Hironnelle and Sifaka goals of promoting democratic norms, dialogue and inter-group tolerance, political engagement, and efficacy.

Recommendations

- At the operational level, organizations seeking to promote democratic norms, political engagement, inter-group tolerance and dialogue, and political efficacy should consider programs that emphasize dialogue. That said, this evaluation focused on one type of discussion program, which followed practices of encouraging open, but respectful and constructive dialogue. Discussion programs that offer combative and less-than-respectful exchanges might not have such positive effects, and could even generate negative results.
- At the policy-making and donor levels, actors should look for and support opportunities for individuals from marginalized communities gain further experiences with witnessing—and perhaps even participating in—such structured discussion. Radio continues to offer strong potential here, but alternate venues—television, digital, face-to-face—should also be explored.
- At the research and evaluation levels, although rigorous studies of the effects of media-based programming are extremely challenging, symmetric encouragement designs can provide opportunities and should be considered more broadly. They show particular promise for measuring the impact of short- or medium-term exposure to programming. In particular, they allow for use of large samples, randomization to identify program effects, and limit social desirability biases that can arise with survey-only approaches. However, we also note that such experiments can be operationally complex, involve extra costs for incentive payments, and work better with platforms that facilitate regular contact with subjects.

