

FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL

Story Material

The Radio Garden

An inspiring story set in Kenya about a teenager who transforms a community radio station into a lifeline during a devastating drought.

Level: B1

Skill: Reading

Duration: ~50 min

Age: Teens (11-16)

Topic: Community & Communication

Pages: 22

The Story

Chapter I— The Voice of the Lake

The radio station was nothing much to look at. It occupied two rooms on the ground floor of a concrete building on the outskirts of Kisumu, Kenya's third-largest city, on the shore of Lake Victoria. The walls were painted pale blue — the colour of the lake on a calm morning. The equipment was old: a mixing desk held together with tape and optimism, two microphones that worked on good days, a **transmitter** on the roof that could reach about eighty kilometres in every direction, and a diesel **generator** in the yard for when the electricity grid failed, which was often.

But Radio Nyanza — 98.4 FM — was the most important institution in the region. It was more important than the hospital, more important than the school, more important, some people said, than the county government itself. Because Radio Nyanza spoke to everyone. It **broadcast** in three languages — Luo, Swahili, and English — reaching fishing communities on the lake, farming villages in the hills, and market traders in the city. It played music, read the news, announced births and deaths, broadcast weather reports, and provided a platform for local voices that no other media bothered to include.

Amara Odhiambo was fifteen years old, and Radio Nyanza was her inheritance. Her father, Joseph, had founded the station in 2014 with a second-hand mixing desk, a borrowed **transmitter**, and a belief that every community deserved its own voice. He had run it for eight years — funding it through small advertisements from local businesses, donations from listeners, and sheer determination — until a sudden illness took him in 2022. He was forty-one.

Amara's mother, Grace, had kept the station running since then, with help from Amara, her older brother Daniel (who was twenty and studying agriculture at Maseno University), and a rotating team of **volunteers** from the community. Grace presented the morning show and the midday news. Uncle Otieno, Joseph's brother, hosted the evening music programme. Auntie Adhiambo read the farming reports. And Amara — quiet, determined, with her father's ear for what people needed to hear — managed the afternoon slot: a two-hour programme of school news, music requests, and community announcements that had, despite her age, become one of the station's most popular broadcasts.

Chapter II— The Dry Season

The rains should have come in March. They did not. By April, the Awach River — the main water source for thousands of farming families in the hills east of Kisumu — had dropped to its lowest level in twenty years. The maize fields, which should have been green and knee-high by now, were brown and stunted. The **livestock** — cattle, goats, chickens — were growing thin, their ribs visible through their hides. Old men sat under acacia trees and said they had never seen a **drought** like this. Old women walked further each day to find water, carrying yellow jerry cans on their heads along dusty paths that led to wells that were slowly going dry.

Amara felt the drought before she understood it. She felt it in the dust that coated everything — her clothes, her hair, the radio equipment. She felt it in the tension at the dinner table, where her mother served smaller portions and said nothing. She felt it in the voices of the callers to her afternoon show, who no longer requested songs but asked questions: When will the rain come? Is there water at the Nyamasaria borehole? Has anyone seen the government water truck? She did not have answers. Not yet.

The crisis became real on a Tuesday in May, when Mama Akinyi — a farmer who lived twelve kilometres east of Kisumu and who called the station every week with farming tips — phoned in with a trembling voice. "My maize is dead," she said on air. "Four acres. All of it. The soil is like concrete. I have ten children and no **harvest**. What am I supposed to do?" Amara did not know what to say. She was fifteen. She knew how to cue music and read announcements. She did not know how to respond to a woman whose family was facing hunger. She looked through the studio glass at her mother, who was listening from the next room. Grace nodded slowly and mouthed two words: "Keep talking."

So Amara kept talking. She asked Mama Akinyi to describe her situation in detail. She asked other listeners to call in with their own experiences. Within an hour, the phone lines were jammed. Farmer after farmer called with the same story: dead crops, dying **livestock**, empty wells, and no information about when the situation might improve. The government's response had been slow and inadequate — a few water trucks that served the city but not the rural communities. Nobody was telling the farmers what to do, where to find water, or how to survive. "Somebody needs to do something," Mama Akinyi said before hanging up. Amara stared at the microphone. Somebody. She looked at the faded photograph of her father on the studio wall. Joseph Odhiambo had built this station because he believed that information could save lives. Now it was time to prove him right.

Chapter III— The Information Hub

Amara called a family meeting that evening. They sat around the table in their small house — Amara, Grace, Daniel (home from university for the weekend), Uncle Otieno, and Auntie Adhiambo. "We need to change the programming," Amara said. "Completely. No more music shows. No more entertainment. Every hour of broadcast needs to be useful. Weather data, water source locations, farming advice, health information, emergency contacts." Grace looked at her daughter with an expression that mixed pride and concern. "That is a big change, Amara. Our advertisers pay for entertainment programming. If we lose them, we lose the station."

"If we do not change, people will lose their crops, their animals, and maybe their lives," Amara replied. "Which is more important?" Daniel supported her. "She is right, Mama. The rains have failed across the entire Lake Victoria basin. This is going to get worse before it gets better. The station is the only source of information that reaches the rural communities. We have a responsibility." Uncle Otieno, who usually said very little, nodded. "Joseph would have done the same thing. He did not build this station to play music. He built it to serve the people." Grace was quiet for a long moment. Then she smiled — a tired, sad, proud smile. "Okay. Let us do it. But we do it properly."

Over the next week, Amara transformed Radio Nyanza into an emergency information hub. She contacted Dr. Wanjiku, a **meteorology** researcher at the University of Nairobi, who agreed to provide daily weather forecasts and satellite data via WhatsApp. Amara translated the technical data into simple, practical language and **broadcast** it three times a day in all three languages. "There is a thirty percent chance of light rain in the Nandi Hills on Thursday. If you are in the Awach River valley, do not expect significant rainfall for at least two more weeks. Plan accordingly."

She created a water-source map. Listeners called in to report which boreholes and wells still had water, and Amara compiled the information into a daily update, broadcast every morning at seven. She invited agricultural extension officers to give live advice on drought-resistant farming techniques. She set up a livestock health segment with a veterinarian from Kisumu who explained how to keep animals alive on reduced water and feed. Every broadcast was repeated in Luo, Swahili, and English, because the communities around Lake Victoria spoke different **dialects** and everyone needed to understand.

Chapter IV— The Network

The most powerful innovation was the simplest. Amara created a system she called "the water chain." Listeners who had access to water — from boreholes, springs, or Lake Victoria itself — called in and offered to share. Listeners who needed water called in and said where they were. Amara matched them on air, coordinating a community water-sharing network that covered an area of eighty kilometres in every direction, using nothing more than a radio signal and human **solidarity**.

"Mama Akinyi in Katito needs water for her livestock. She has ten cattle and six goats. Is there anyone within walking distance who can help?" Three minutes later: "This is James Ouma in Sondu. I have a working borehole. Tell Mama Akinyi to send her son with jerry cans. We will fill them." It happened dozens of times a day. Strangers helping strangers. Neighbours helping neighbours. Communities that had never communicated before discovering that they shared the same problems and could share the same solutions.

Daniel, meanwhile, was working on a longer-term project. Using his agricultural studies and advice from his university professors, he helped organise community work parties to dig **irrigation** channels connecting the river to the fields, so that what little water remained could be distributed more efficiently. Fifty **volunteers** from six villages spent three weekends digging channels with hand tools, guided by technical drawings that Daniel had created and Amara had described on the radio.

The family worked around the clock. Grace presented the morning show from six to nine, then spent the day coordinating with aid organisations and government agencies. Uncle Otieno maintained the equipment — the generator, the **antenna**, the ageing mixing desk — with improvised repairs and remarkable ingenuity. Auntie Adhiambo managed the call log, keeping a handwritten record of every water request and every offer of help. And Amara broadcast from three in the afternoon until eight in the evening, her voice steady and calm, a thread of certainty in an uncertain world.

Chapter V— The Lake

Even during the drought, Lake Victoria remained. The second-largest freshwater lake in the world, shared by Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, it was the heartbeat of the region — its water, its fish, its weather patterns shaping the lives of thirty million people along its shores. Amara had grown up with the lake. Her earliest memories were of sitting on her father's shoulders at the fish market in Dunga Beach, watching the wooden boats come in at dawn with their catch of tilapia and Nile perch, the fishermen singing as they hauled their nets.

The lake had its own daily rhythm. At dawn, the fishermen launched their boats — long, narrow vessels painted in bright blues and greens, powered by outboard motors that coughed and spluttered in the cold morning air. By mid-morning, the fish market was in full swing: women gutting, scaling, and frying fish over charcoal stoves; men loading crates onto lorries for Nairobi; children running between the stalls stealing chips. In the afternoon, the wind picked up, and the lake turned from silver to deep blue, and the hippos that lived in the shallows near Ndere Island emerged to graze on the shore.

But the drought was affecting the lake too. Water levels had dropped, exposing mudflats where boats used to dock. The fish catches were declining — the tilapia were moving to deeper, cooler water, and the fishermen had to travel further and use more fuel to find them. The hyacinth — an invasive plant that choked the lake's surface — was spreading faster in the warm, shallow water, blocking boat channels and reducing oxygen for fish. "The lake is sick," said Baba Okello, a seventy-year-old fisherman who had been Amara's father's friend and who called the station every evening to share his observations. "I have fished these waters for sixty years. The lake is telling us something, and we are not listening."

Amara started a new segment: "Voice of the Lake." Fishermen called in with reports on water conditions, fish movements, and weather observations from the lake's surface. Dr. Wanjiku helped her combine these local observations with satellite data to create surprisingly accurate short-term weather forecasts. "The fishermen's knowledge is extraordinary," Dr. Wanjiku told Amara. "They have been observing the lake every day for generations. Their data is different from ours — experiential rather than instrumental — but it is equally valid. When we combine the two, we get a more complete picture than either could provide alone."

Chapter VI— The Threat

Chapter VII— Fighting Back

In July, just as the station's crisis programming was reaching its peak effectiveness, a letter arrived from the Kenya Communications Authority. Radio Nyanza's broadcasting licence was due for renewal, and the fee had increased by four hundred percent — from fifty thousand to two hundred thousand Kenyan shillings. It was an amount the station could not possibly pay. Grace read the letter three times, then put it face down on the table. "They want to shut us down," she said quietly. Uncle Otieno shook his head. "The county governor has a friend who wants to start a commercial station on our **frequency**. This is not about fees. This is about politics."

The timing was devastating. The drought was at its worst point. The water chain was coordinating deliveries to over two hundred families a day. The farming advice segments had helped hundreds of **subsistence** farmers adapt their techniques to survive the dry conditions. Losing the station now would be like cutting a lifeline during a rescue. Amara felt panic rising in her chest. Then she felt something else — the same cold, clear determination she had felt the evening she decided to change the programming. She was not going to let this happen.

Amara launched the campaign on air. She explained the situation honestly: the licence fee, the political pressure, the risk of closure. She asked listeners to sign a **petition** — either by calling the station, sending a text message, or visiting collection points at local shops and churches. Within three days, four thousand people had signed. Mama Akinyi, whose maize had died in May but whose family had survived thanks to the water chain, organised a group of women who walked twelve kilometres to the county government office carrying a banner that read: RADIO NYANZA SAVES LIVES — DO NOT SILENCE US.

A journalist from the Daily Nation, Kenya's largest newspaper, heard about the story and travelled to Kisumu. Her article — "The Fifteen-Year-Old Running the Radio Station That Is Saving Her Community" — was published on the front page. It was picked up by international media. Within a week, Amara had been interviewed by the BBC, Al Jazeera, and three Kenyan television channels. The Communications Authority, suddenly under national scrutiny, agreed to review the fee increase. The county governor, who had been quietly supporting the commercial station bid, issued a statement praising Radio Nyanza's "invaluable community service" and announced that he had personally intervened to reduce the licence fee.

Chapter VIII— The Rain

The rain came on a Thursday evening in August, five months after it should have arrived. Amara was on air when she saw the first flash of lightning over the lake through the studio window. Dr. Wanjiku had predicted it two days earlier — a weather system moving in from the west — and Amara had broadcast the forecast every three hours. But prediction and reality are different things, and when the first heavy drops hit the iron roof of the studio, making a sound like a thousand tiny drums, Amara stopped mid-sentence and listened.

Then she heard something else. Through the open window, carried on the wet wind, she could hear people cheering. Not just nearby — from across the city, across the hills, from every direction. The sound of thousands of people celebrating rain. She leaned into the microphone. "It is raining," she said simply. "It is raining over Kisumu." The phone lines exploded. Listener after listener called in — from Katito, from Sondu, from Ahero, from the lake shore — all reporting the same thing: rain. Real, heavy, beautiful rain. Mama Akinyi was crying. Baba Okello was laughing. Uncle Otieno, in the next room, was standing at the window with his hands raised, letting the water hit his face.

The rains continued for three weeks — not the devastating floods that sometimes followed drought, but steady, soaking rain that filled the wells, revived the rivers, and turned the brown fields green again. The Awach River rose. The boreholes refilled. The **livestock** that had survived the drought began to recover. Farmers who had followed the station's

advice on drought-resistant planting techniques were the first to see new growth. The **irrigation** channels that Daniel and the volunteers had dug proved their worth — distributing water evenly across the valley and reducing the wasteful flooding that normally accompanied heavy rain after a dry period.

The crisis was over. But the changes it had brought were permanent. The communities around Lake Victoria had discovered something about themselves during the drought: they were stronger together than apart. The water chain, the shared farming advice, the coordinated volunteer efforts — these had been born from desperation, but they had proved their value, and nobody wanted to give them up. Radio Nyanza had been the thread connecting all of it. A small station with old equipment and a fifteen-year-old presenter had held a community together through the worst drought in a generation.

Chapter IX— Building Forward

In the months that followed, Amara and her family worked to transform the emergency measures into permanent systems. Daniel, with funding from an agricultural development charity, designed a community **reservoir** system — a network of small dams and storage tanks that would capture rainwater during the wet season and distribute it during dry periods. The construction was done by volunteer labour, with materials donated by local businesses and coordinated, naturally, through radio broadcasts.

Dr. Wanjiku established a permanent weather monitoring station near Kisumu, linked to Radio Nyanza, so that farmers would have access to accurate local forecasts year-round. The water chain was formalised into a community mutual aid network, with village representatives meeting monthly to coordinate resources. A **sustainable** farming programme, developed by Daniel and his university colleagues, provided training in drought-resistant crops, water conservation, and soil management.

The radio station itself was transformed. A technology company in Nairobi, impressed by the station's impact, donated new equipment: a digital mixing desk, professional microphones, a solar panel system that freed the station from dependence on the unreliable electricity grid and the expensive diesel generator. The Daily Nation journalist returned and produced a documentary that was broadcast on national television. Donations arrived from across Kenya and from the Kenyan diaspora abroad. For the first time in its history, Radio Nyanza had a proper annual budget.

Amara added new programmes: a health show presented by a nurse from Kisumu County Hospital; an education segment where teachers answered questions from students who could not attend school regularly; a women's business hour where female entrepreneurs shared advice and opportunities. Every programme followed the same principle that had guided the drought response: useful information, in the right languages, for the people who needed it most. "Radio is the most democratic technology ever invented," Amara told a journalist. "You do not need electricity, internet, or literacy. You just need ears."

Chapter X— Daily Life

Through everything, daily life in Kisumu continued with its usual energy. The city woke at dawn with the call to prayer from the mosque near the old port and the crowing of roosters from every neighbourhood. By six o'clock, the matatus — the brightly painted minibuses that were Kenya's unofficial public transport system — were already packed with workers, students, and traders heading to the city centre. The matatu drivers played music at volumes that could be heard three streets away and drove with a cheerful disregard for traffic laws that terrified visitors but was considered perfectly normal by locals.

The Kibuye Market — Kisumu's largest open-air market — covered an area the size of several football pitches and sold everything: vegetables, fruit, fish, meat, clothes, shoes, phone accessories, cooking pots, and furniture made from recycled materials. Amara's grandmother, Dani — Grace's mother — had a stall at the market selling dried fish and groundnuts. She was sixty-eight, fierce, funny, and had opinions about everything, which she shared freely with her customers, her neighbours, and anyone else within earshot. "A woman who can sell fish," Dani often said, "can do anything."

Amara's daily routine was a balancing act. School from seven-thirty to three. Radio from three-thirty to eight. Homework from eight to ten. Sleep from ten to five-thirty. Repeat. On weekends, she helped her mother with the house, visited Dani at the market, and spent time with friends — swimming in the shallow waters near Dunga Beach, eating roasted maize from street vendors, and watching Premier League football on the television at Uncle Otieno's house, where half the neighbourhood gathered every Saturday afternoon.

Food was at the centre of everything. Grace cooked ugali — the cornmeal staple that accompanied every meal — with a precision that Amara admired but could not replicate. Dani made the best fish stew in Kisumu, slow-cooked with tomatoes, onions, and coriander in a clay pot over charcoal. Auntie Adhiambo made mandazi — sweet fried doughnuts — every Sunday morning, and the children of the neighbourhood materialised at her door as if summoned by the smell. "In this family," Grace said, "food is love. We may argue about everything else, but we always agree on dinner."

Chapter XI— Joseph's Legacy

One year after the drought, a ceremony was held at Radio Nyanza. The newly renovated studio was officially opened by the county governor — the same governor who had tried to shut the station down, but who was now, with the selective memory common to politicians, claiming to have "always supported community broadcasting." The studio was named the Joseph Odhiambo Broadcasting Centre. A plaque on the wall read: "For the man who believed that every voice deserves to be heard. 1981-2022."

The entire family attended. Grace wore her best dress. Daniel gave a speech about his father's vision and how the drought had proved its value. Dani sat in the front row and cried without embarrassment. Uncle Otieno stood at the back with his arms folded, nodding slowly, exactly as Joseph used to do. Amara's brother Emre — who was twelve and had recently announced his intention to become either a radio presenter or a professional footballer, depending on which career offered more free mandazi — held the scissors for the ribbon cutting.

Amara spoke last. She stood at the microphone — the same microphone she had spoken into during those long, difficult afternoons during the drought — and looked out at the crowd. Neighbours, farmers, fishermen, teachers, market traders, the women who had marched to the county office, the volunteers who had dug the **irrigation** channels, Dr. Wanjiku from Nairobi, the Daily Nation journalist, Mama Akinyi with her ten children, Baba Okello leaning on his walking stick. Her community. Her audience.

"My father built this station because he believed that information is the most powerful tool there is," she said. "Not money. Not weapons. Not politics. Information. If you know where the water is, you can survive a drought. If you know when the rain is coming, you can plant at the right time. If you know that your neighbour needs help, you can offer it. The radio does not create the knowledge. The community creates the knowledge. The radio just makes sure it travels." She paused. "My father was right. And I promise that as long as Radio Nyanza exists, this community will never be silent. Every voice will be heard. That is his **legacy**. And that is my promise."

Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Drought	A long period without rain, causing water shortage and crop failure
Broadcast	To send out a programme on radio or television
Frequency	The radio wave channel on which a station transmits its signal
Transmitter	Equipment that sends out radio or television signals
Irrigation	A system for supplying water to crops through pipes or channels
Harvest	The process of gathering crops when they are ready
Livestock	Farm animals such as cattle, goats, and chickens
Meteorology	The scientific study of weather and climate
Famine	Extreme scarcity of food affecting a large population
Reservoir	A large natural or artificial lake used to store water
Sustainable	Able to continue without damaging the environment or resources
Solidarity	Unity and support among people with a shared purpose
Volunteer	A person who works without being paid, especially for a good cause
Antenna	A metal rod or wire that receives or sends radio signals
Generator	A machine that produces electricity
Dialect	A regional variety of a language with different words or pronunciation
Subsistence	Producing just enough food or income to survive, with nothing extra
Resilience	The ability to recover from difficulties and keep going
Petition	A formal written request signed by many people asking for change
Legacy	Something meaningful left behind for future generations

Comprehension Quiz

1. Where was Radio Nyanza located?

- A) In the centre of Nairobi
- B) In a small building near Lake Victoria in Kisumu
- C) On top of Mount Kenya
- D) In a shopping centre in Mombasa

2. Who had originally founded the radio station?

- A) The Kenyan government
- B) Amara's father, Joseph Odhiambo
- C) A foreign charity organisation
- D) The local school principal

3. What was the first sign that the drought was serious?

- A) The lake completely disappeared
- B) The Awach River dropped to its lowest level in twenty years
- C) All the animals left the area
- D) The radio station lost its signal

4. How did Amara transform the radio station during the crisis?

- A) She played more music to cheer people up
- B) She turned it into an information hub broadcasting weather data, water locations, and farming advice
- C) She closed the station and went to help on the farms
- D) She sold the station to raise money

5. Why was broadcasting in multiple languages important?

- A) It impressed the government officials
- B) Different communities spoke different languages and everyone needed the information
- C) It was required by law
- D) It attracted more advertisers

6. What did Dr. Wanjiku provide to the radio station?

- A) Money to buy new equipment
- B) Satellite weather data and forecasts that Amara broadcast to farmers
- C) Food supplies for the community
- D) Legal advice about the station's licence

7. How did the community water-sharing system work?

- A) Water was sold to the highest bidder
- B) Amara coordinated distribution through radio broadcasts so every village got fair access
- C) Only farmers with livestock received water
- D) The government delivered water by truck

8. What happened when the county government tried to close the station?

- A) Everyone accepted the decision quietly
- B) The community organised protests and a petition, and national media covered the story
- C) Amara agreed to sell the station
- D) The station was immediately shut down

9. What long-term changes did the drought experience bring?

- A) Everyone moved to the city
- B) A community reservoir, improved irrigation, and a permanent early warning system
- C) The radio station was replaced by television
- D) Farmers stopped growing crops entirely

10. What is the main message of the story?

- A) That radio is outdated technology with no modern value
- B) That local communication, community solidarity, and sharing knowledge can save lives
- C) That droughts only affect poor countries
- D) That young people should not get involved in adult problems

Answer Key

#	Ans	Question
1	B	Where was Radio Nyanza located?
2	B	Who had originally founded the radio station?
3	B	What was the first sign that the drought was serious?
4	B	How did Amara transform the radio station during the crisis?
5	B	Why was broadcasting in multiple languages important?
6	B	What did Dr. Wanjiku provide to the radio station?
7	B	How did the community water-sharing system work?
8	B	What happened when the county government tried to close the station?
9	B	What long-term changes did the drought experience bring?
10	B	What is the main message of the story?

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