PARIS — In 1994, radio in Rwanda was all about hate and violence. The government used it to incite people to kill, and the killers were often seen with a gun in one hand and a receiver in the other as they tried to locate enemies.

Today, Rwandan radio is a voice of hope and reconciliation. One of its most popular programs, the soap opera "Musekeweya," or "New Dawn," is about a country divided, much like Rwanda 13 years ago, but one in which the stars find a way around the conflict.

La Benevolencia, the Dutch organization that finances and produces the show, says the characters "represent a new attitude that harkens back to a much gentler generation of Rwandans."

"The aim is to demonstrate how things could change and evolve in a positive way and how such horrible events like the genocide will not repeat themselves," said Johan Deflander, regional head of mission for La Benevolencia.

The show is part of a worldwide trend of using radio to promote positive change.

Similar projects have succeeded in other parts of Africa and the developing world. In western and southern Africa, a series of local-language educational radio dramas addressing social issues like health and human rights are reaching a wide audience.

In India, a show called "Tinka Tinka Sukh," or "Little Steps to a Better Life," helped engineer social change where law had failed. It was also one of the first that demonstrated the potential success of such programming, said Michael Castlen, executive director of PCI Media Impact, which produced the show.

The program, which aired from 1996 to 1998, covered issues like women's empowerment and health, HIV, family size and conservation. PCI Media Impact says on its Web site that in one village, a group was formed to end dowry-giving, something the government has tried in vain to limit since 1961.

Jonathan Marks, director of his own broadcast media consultancy, Critical Distance in the Netherlands, said radio serials were more attractive to listeners than lectures.

"These kind of shows can get the message across in a much less obvious way, not like educational programs do," he said.
Another advantage of radio is that it is very affordable. In Rwanda, as well as other developing countries, radios are omnipresent.

The idea for "Musekeweya" was generated by a series of post-genocide seminars for politicians that was organized by reconciliation leaders and trauma experts. The program airs on government radio, which reaches almost 100 percent of the country, and on two private stations.

La Benevolencija said the program was tolerated and even supported by the government, which saw that it could help reconciliation efforts.

"Musekeweya" began airing in June 2004, during the 10th commemoration of the Rwanda genocide. La Benevolencija said that close to 90 percent of the country's radio audience listened to the program, based on what it called a "scientifically representative" annual survey of the country's population and that more than 90 percent of those 18 and older have access to a radio.

The story focuses on two villages, Bumanzi and Muhumuro, which serve as symbols of the Hutu and Tutsi - during the genocide, Hutu eradicated hundreds of thousands of Tutsi and moderate members of their own tribe.

Families from both villages live off the land but Bumanzi's fields are more fertile than Muhumuro's, and animosity and envy lead to violence.

In the middle of the conflict, two lovers, one from each family, try to find ways to overcome the conflict and make their love succeed.

La Benevolencija said it planned to expand the show's geographical and thematic scope. Neighboring countries in the Great Lake region like Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the western part of Tanzania, the southern part of Uganda and portions of Kenya are all affected by sporadic violence and civil war.

La Benevolencija said it had also tested an international television format for a broadcast series, to be piloted as a tool against rampant hate speech in Kinshasa.

By initiating a radio show like "Musekeweya" in these areas, Deflandre said he hoped to eventually "interlink all the story lines together and to broadcast it as one show in this region."

But will this story have the same tragic ending as Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet"?

"We will see, but I think this one will find a happy ending," Deflandre said.