



Community Radio for Change and Development

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ABSTRACT *Colin Fraser and Sonia Restrepo-Estrada illustrate the role of a radio station, owned and run by a community, in providing the forum for the participatory, public dialogue which is essential for social change. The radio station is a platform for identifying and analysing problems and their solutions, thereby determining development inputs that truly meet local needs. Open access to on-air complaints from the audience can pressure local authorities to adopt practices of good governance and transparency. Cheap and easy to install and operate, community radio can also be the interface between poor communities and the Internet.*

KEYWORDS *broadcasting; communication; community media; democracy; good governance; participation; social change*

Technology is not the problem

The obstacle to the use of communication technology to help marginalized groups to improve their situation lies in a lack of political will, and also in policies that fail to recognize the importance of communication as a social process that can help to bring change and development. For example, radio broadcasting leaps the barriers of isolation and illiteracy and it is the most economical electronic medium to broadcast and receive. But despite there being two billion radio receivers in the world and some 20,000 radio stations, radio has still not been used systematically to help fight poverty, malnutrition and poor health in the developing world.

The need for community participation at all stages of a development initiative has been widely recognized since the late 1970s. However, it has not been sufficiently recognized that participation and communication are different sides of the same coin. Only by creating communication processes in which people in the community enter into dialogue and analytical discussion among themselves will they participate and decide for themselves on changes that affect their lives

and become active in implementing them. Community media, and in particular radio, can provide the platform for the public dialogue through which people can define who they are, what they want, and how to get it, at the same time building long-term capacity to solve problems in ways that lead to sustainable social change and development.

Distinct from other forms of broadcasting, community radio is a non-profit service that is owned and managed by a particular community, usually through a trust or a foundation. It is also managed by the community, and its operations rely mainly on the community's own resources. Its programmes are based on audience access and participation and reflect the special interests and needs of the community.

However, the term 'community radio' is often used rather loosely and ignores the key principles of community ownership and control, as for example when a radio station is owned and run by an NGO or religious organization, or when a station's broadcast footprint covers a local area only. Although such broadcasting may do some useful work for change and development, we are only concerned here with true community radio, as described above.

Community radio in the context of the globalization of media

There is much discussion about the effect on local cultures of the increasingly globalized commercial media output with its well-trying and standard – if not banal – entertainment formats. But one thing is clear: they can never respond to the socio-economic and development needs of the countries they reach, let alone those of marginalized communities within those countries. Hence, globalized media and community media do not compete. The former provides irrelevant entertainment, while the latter deals with local issues in the local languages and cultural context, relating to local problems and concerns, and aiming to help the community develop socially, culturally and economically.

The functions of community radio

The earliest experiences of community radio go back more than half a century, to the Miners'

Radios of Bolivia, which were instrumental in pressing for better working conditions for tin miners. Poverty and social injustice were the stimulus for that initiative. This was the first recorded case of radio broadcasting being used by a sector of society to improve its socio-economic status. Since the early 1980s, UNESCO has been actively promoting community radio as an important agent for change and development. Its activities in many countries have often been financially supported by DANIDA (Danish Agency for Development Assistance).

The principal functions of community radio are:

- To reflect and promote local identity, character and culture by focusing principally on local content. Culture is how the people of a community talk about their past and their future. It is what they care about. Like life itself, culture is infinitely variable and constantly evolving. Community culture is also artistic expression through local music, dance, poetry, theatre and story telling. Local performers are encouraged to go on air uninhibited by considerations of the 'professional standards' they may have acquired from mainstream media. Culture is also language, so programming includes the languages of any minority groups in the community.
- To create a diversity of voices and opinions on the air through its openness to participation from all sectors. Some discord is present in all communities, but the acknowledgement of conflict is necessary for democracy and for democratic communities. Community radio tries to air objectively all sides of a discussion without itself taking sides.
- To encourage open dialogue and democratic process by providing an independent platform for interactive discussion about matters and decisions of importance to the community. In essence, the core of democratic process is the ability of people to hear and make themselves heard. Community radio provides the forum for that to happen. This is consonant with the decentralization process in many countries that aims to bring democratic decision-making closer to the people concerned. And what is happening at the grassroots level – as portrayed by the community radio programming – can be heard by

local government and private institutions, as well as being relayed to policy makers, thus making it possible to design development initiatives that best meet the aspirations and needs of the people.

- To promote social change and development. In marginalized communities people all have their individual perceptions about their situation, but what is required for change and development is a collective perception of the local reality and of the options for improving it. This collective perception can only be achieved through internal discussions to analyse specific problems, identify possible solutions, and mobilize the appropriate people or groups for action. Community radio provides the perfect platform for this internal discussion.
- To promote good governance and civil society by playing a community watchdog role that makes local authorities and politicians more conscious of their public responsibilities. The marginalized and the oppressed normally have no way to complain when authorities take advantage of them, but community radio gives them a voice to air their grievances and obtain their due rights.

Some other functions of community radio include: sharing of information and innovation; giving a voice to the voiceless, especially to women and young people in some societies; and providing a social service as a replacement for the telephone.¹

Government policies and legislation

Many governments, which were previously allergic to any form of broadcasting they could not control, have made sweeping changes in recent years. This is particularly the case in Africa where, mainly after a conference called 'Freedom for African Radios' held in Bamako in 1993, many countries have now formally recognized the important role that community radio can play and legislated in its favour. As a result, community radio stations have mushroomed to the point where some African countries now have dozens of them. On the other hand, in several regions of the world, community radio suffers because current legislation is either

non-existent, inconsistent, or basically hostile. For example, Asian broadcasting legislation generally lags behind that of Africa and Latin America.

There have been cases where the appropriate legislation in favour of community radio existed, but, nevertheless, the government was reluctant to issue the licence and employed delaying tactics for several years, caving in only when the station announced that it was going on air anyway, licence or no licence. In one case, when the licence was finally issued, it had numerous conditions attached to it, such as limiting the station's air time to two hours a day. But subsequently the government was so happy with the results achieved that it extended its permission first to 13 hours and then to 24 hours of air time daily, and allowed advertising to help the station towards sustainability. It also approved licences for several other stations.

Community will and organization

Community radio succeeds when it grows out of the community's sense of internal cohesion and consciousness. A community that analyses its needs in detail and thinks about the causes of its problems and marginalization will often come to the conclusion that it requires communication to help people formulate common understanding and common goals. This is the foundation stone for a community setting up its own radio station.

The ownership and management of the future station are crucial issues that require good preparatory work. Even within the overall concept of community ownership of a station, there usually needs to be some body, such as a foundation or an association, which represents the community's interests and also provides a juridical entity. In addition, some sort of community media council needs to be formed to represent the different sectors in the community. The decisions regarding all aspects of the ownership and management must be transparent and democratic.

Costs and operations

The basic equipment for a community radio station costs as little as US\$20,000, although increasing

the amount to US\$30,000 will provide some important optional extras. The studio can be built by the community using local materials, and the antenna mast can even be made from water pipes. The power output from the FM transmitter is usually between 20 and 100 watts, though it is important to ensure that the broadcast pattern covers the whole community, which normally includes 5000 to 25,000 people. Less than 5000 may not provide the critical mass that will allow the radio to sustain itself; more than 25,000 brings the risk that the radio will become impersonal and difficult to manage. In respect of radio receivers, there are even FM models with a solar strip that can either power the radio or charge its battery. The radio can also be wound up by hand, with two minutes of winding giving 30 minutes of listening.

Those producing equipment for community radio have emphasized simplicity of installation, use, and maintenance. The importance of this is demonstrated by a major UNESCO/DANIDA-supported community radio project in the Philippines, which now has 24 stations in operation. Local technicians have easily taken on the installation and maintenance tasks, while community volunteers run the stations and produce the programmes. Almost none of them had ever been inside a radio station or held a microphone before they were given an initial three-week training course in radio production. An important part of that training focuses on a code of conduct for broadcasters to ensure that they are fully aware of the ethics and values that must govern their work.

Using radio to link people with the Internet

Some promising work is being done under UNESCO auspices to use community radio stations as the interface between villagers and the Internet. For example, programmes called 'Radio browsing the Internet' allow community broadcasters to discuss website information in the local language and adapt the information to local interests. Listeners can request information on specific topics, such as market trends, agriculture, health, or life skills for poverty alleviation. The broadcasters search the web for the requested information and put the

results on air. They can also arrange for on-line discussions between health workers, agricultural extensionists, or ordinary villagers with technical experts to discuss a particular problem and broadcast the results.

Community radio stations can also be the base for multi-purpose rural 'telecentres', places with an Internet connection and other services such as public telephone and fax, collections of videos, cassette tapes, books, etc. The sale of records and cassettes, hiring out of videos and audio-visual equipment, and providing services such as desk-top publishing can help such centres to become self-sufficient.

Some typical effects of community radio

Precise methodology for evaluating the impact of community radio, based on appropriate social indicators, has still to be devised. However, some communities have managed to bring about important social changes and development initiatives as the result of a thorough discussion and debate of issues broadcast by their own radio station. Some examples follow. To an outsider they may appear trivial, but in the context of the prevailing poverty and seen against the people's traditional apathy and inertia, they signify that radio can create the will and energy for change in communities.

Gambling, which had been a passionate pastime for men, became socially unacceptable in a community. A series of broadcast discussions and interviews with women and children of gamblers made the men conscious of the hardships their losses were causing, and so they gave it up.

Illegal logging and fishing by major corporations was brought to an end by villagers who brought their complaints to the radio station. The local authorities, who had been bribed to turn a blind eye, were brought to account by the criticisms expressed on the air.

Delinquent and unemployed youths were motivated to clean up the village pond and start an ornamental fish production enterprise. Butchers were prohibited from bringing live animals to the market and slaughtering them there. The clean up of a large poultry farm to reduce its smell and

pollution was organized. Building a footbridge and providing the lighting for it were undertaken by a community. A day care centre for children built by the local authorities was instigated.

A programme called *Taxi Talk* was begun to air the grievances of taxi operators and their clients. They had caused such rivalries that people had been killed in the acrimony. The radio provided the forum for reasoned discussion that brought peace to the situation.

In a community where it had been everyday practice for the authorities, institutions, and merchants to abuse *campesinos* by overcharging them or by selling materials intended for public works

projects, the new radio station began regularly broadcasting information about such abuses. As a result, they virtually disappeared.

These are just a few illustrative, even if anecdotal, examples of what community radio can achieve. Given community radio's enormous potential for participatory communication as a way of identifying, analysing and solving problems at the grassroots level, and of stimulating communities to become more proactive in the pursuit of their own betterment, governments that have not done so should liberalize their media policies in its favour. And development agencies should actively promote and support it as part of their projects.

Note

1 Please contact the authors for further information on these aspects.