

Voices from Villages: Community Radio in the Developing World

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Mary Myers

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for Democracy**
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The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), a project of the National Endowment for Democracy, aims to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

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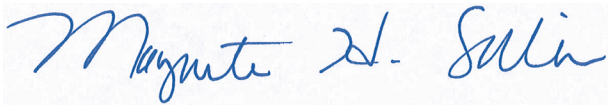
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) commissioned this study of community radio in the developing world. The purpose of this report is to better understand the current situation and trends in community radio and the challenges that donors and media development implementers face in supporting community radio.

CIMA is grateful to Mary Myers, an expert on international media development with many years of experience in this field, particularly in radio for the poor, for her research and insights on this topic.

The report has been slightly revised from its original publication to reflect comments received. We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts and spur further research on the role of community radio in the world's news media ecosystem.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marguerite H. Sullivan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
Center for International Media Assistance

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AFRRI	African Farm Radio Research Initiative
AIR	All India Radio
AMARC	World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States (former Soviet Union)
DFID	UK Department for International Development
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
FAO	United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization
FM	Frequency Modulation
GSM	Global System for Mobile Communications
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organizations
MDDA	Media Development and Diversity Agency (South Africa)
MDLF	Media Development Loan Fund
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SAMDEF	Southern Africa Media Development Fund
SIDA	Swedish International Development Corporation Agency
SMS	Short Messaging Service (texting)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development Fund
WAMDEF	Western Africa Media Development Fund

Executive Summary

Since the 1990s community radio has mushroomed throughout the developing world.¹ In fact it has grown faster than either state or commercial radio. Across Africa, community radio grew, on average, by a significant 1,386 percent between 2000 and 2006. Asia and Latin America have also seen remarkable community radio booms. This has been due mainly to the widespread liberalization of the airwaves, the falling costs of the necessary technology, and a thirst for alternatives to government-controlled and commercial media.

International aid agencies are showing ever greater interest in community media's ability to inform and empower. More governments are acknowledging the contribution of community media to education, public health, and economic development and are creating policy and legal frameworks to enable its expansion. Nevertheless, community radio still faces repression in many countries.

This report explores the reasons for this expansion and the constraints and challenges community radio still faces. It also looks at community radio's record in terms of development and examines its real achievements against its ideals.

For purposes of this report, community radio is defined as radio by and for the community, be it a physical community or a community of interest, with an emphasis on community ownership and management on a not-for-profit basis. Wider and more hybrid definitions are acknowledged and explored, and community radio's differences from vernacular, fundamentalist, and hate radio are clarified.

The report also points out where community radio is most prevalent in the developing world and the reasons for this, looking especially at the kind of pro-freedom policies that allow it to thrive and what positive change is possible where community radio works well. A short case study takes a more detailed look at India, where community radio was only recently allowed.

The major challenge for community radio continues to be economic survival and sustainability beyond donor and NGO support. Various models are explored, including some new initiatives that emphasize a more business-oriented approach than has been the case in the past.

Another big challenge is the right of community radio to exist at all. The record of the support given by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC, in the French acronym) is examined in light of these continuing struggles, as well as the work of national-level platforms also engaged in advocacy.

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New technology presents great opportunities to both community radio broadcasters and their listeners. Arguably, mobile telephony represents the biggest revolution in radio broadcasting since the invention of the transistor, while computers and the internet have transformed—or have the potential to transform—programming. The report looks at the extent to which community radio stations have adopted new technologies and describes some of the advantages and pitfalls they have experienced.

The report concludes that the community radio boom is set to continue for some time to come. However, significant threats to its sustainability remain. They include:

- The increasingly fractured nature of broadcasting, which means that the most economically weak will be squeezed out of the market by commercial competitors, especially in urban areas.
- Increasing suspicion of minorities and special-interest groups in countries experiencing terrorist and other threats to national unity and security, meaning potential difficulties for community radio in such places.
- Further development of technology and on-demand content, such that conventional broadcasting on the FM wave-band will soon start to look outdated.

The report suggests a number of steps that donors, governments, and community radio stations themselves can take to bolster the sustainability of community radio:

- International donors should continue investing in community radio as a way to support freedom of expression and democratic participation.
- In addition to grants, donors should look at business models for sustaining community radio in the long term.
- Governments should adopt mechanisms for state aid to the community radio sector or expand and improve access to the mechanisms they already have.
- The international community should exert more pressure on governments to enact legislation in support of community radio.
- Community radio stations everywhere must look to the future and embrace new technology in creative ways.

Overview: What Is Community Radio?

Community radio stations are not-for-profit radio services designed to operate on a small scale and to deliver community benefits. Community broadcasting involves radio by and for the community, be it a physical community or a community of interest. Its distinct character can be summarized as follows:

- It should be run for social gain and community benefit, not for profit.
- It should be owned by and accountable to the community that it seeks to serve.
- It should provide for participation by the community in programming and management.²

“By and for the community” may sound straightforward, but definitions are more complex than that. A community can be many things: from a small village, to a sprawling city, believers of a particular religion, or a diaspora united by a common language. The way groups define themselves is fluid, depending on the socio-historical conditions of a particular moment,³ which means that defining the term “community radio” with any precision is almost impossible.

Because the possible definitions are so many, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC)⁴ has given its members the prerogative to define it themselves:

Community radio, rural radio, cooperative radio, participatory radio, free radio, alternative, popular, educational radio. If the radio stations, networks and production groups that make up the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters refer to themselves by a variety of names, then their practices and profiles are even more varied.⁵

So community radio covers many different types of radio. But whatever its legal status, the word “participation” is crucial. Indeed in Colombia, community participation in programming is a legal requirement stipulated in the community radio legislation⁶. As independent development consultant Jean Fairbairn puts it: “Participation is the key defining feature of community media; it is what places community media outside of traditional media models, in which audiences are passive receivers of messages.”⁷

Additionally, it is worth quoting the following poetic definition as offered by José Ignacio López Vigil, author of *Rebel Radio*, in 1997:

When radio fosters the participation of citizens and defends their interests; when it reflects the tastes of the majority and makes good humour and hope its main purpose; when it truly informs; when it helps resolve the thousand and one problems of daily life; when all ideas are debated in its programs and all opinions are respected; when cultural diversity is stimulated over commercial homogeneity; when women are main players in

communication and not simply a pretty voice or a publicity gimmick; when no type of dictatorship is tolerated, not even the musical dictatorship of the big recording studios; when everyone’s words fly without discrimination or censorship, that is community radio.⁸

Despite the fluidity of definition, in any discussion of community radio it is important to differentiate true community radio from ethnically-based radio stations used for propaganda and hate messages. For example, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, the notorious station in Rwanda that incited genocide in 1994, was *not* a community station. It was a nationwide commercial station controlled by a private consortium made up of Hutu politicians and businessmen. The only “community” it served was one of “Hutu power,” as it guided and encouraged the work of the militias who systematically killed hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Likewise, the vernacular radio stations in Kenya that were accused of fomenting post-election violence in January 2008 were not community radios, but commercial FM stations that were responsible for much of the hate speech and ethnic prejudice that emerged onto the airwaves. As shown by Jamal Abdi and James Deane, in their study of media and the Kenyan elections of 2007 “the few community radio stations that ... exist in Kenya appear to have played a much more positive role during the ... crisis than their better financed commercial rivals.”⁹

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This is because “bringing the community together is in community radios’ DNA,” as Deane puts it.¹⁰ Thus, studies showed that community stations like Pamoja FM, in the Kibera slum outside Nairobi, worked to calm the conflict and stop fighting between groups of youths—they did not broadcast the sort of divisive name calling and negative ethnic stereotyping in which some local Kikuyu or Luo stations indulged.¹¹

Similarly, in Pakistan it is estimated by the state broadcast regulator that there are at least 100 clandestine radio stations currently broadcasting illegally in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Northern Pakistan that are run by mullahs or religious extremist groups. These are not community radios. In fact, according to a 2009 report by International Media Support,¹² many of these were formerly community radios that have fallen into the hands of radicals: “Mullahs began using the radio to spread hate and fear a few years ago and realise that it is an effective weapon useful to instill terror in inhabitants of FATA and parts of NWPF [North East Frontier Province] who are cut off from the rest of the country and hostage to the Taliban and other militant groups.”

Although, arguably, the followers of the Taliban and other radical Muslim groups in this area are a “community,” this is surely an example of community radio being turned on its head to

become anti-inclusion, anti-public service, and blatantly partisan. The argument for legalizing and encouraging genuine community radio stations in situations like these becomes compelling, as the local population clearly needs quality alternatives to biased news and propaganda, and banning the stations can lead them to fall into the wrong hands and to operate clandestinely.

History and Growth of Community Radio

The first community radio in the developing world is widely acknowledged to have been Radio Sutatenza, established in Colombia in 1947.¹³ This was the first model of rural and community broadcasting in which the emphasis was on rural development, liberation, and literacy. This was followed by radios set up and managed by the tin miners of Bolivia in 1949, which presented a radical alternative to the government and were attacked by the military for providing political information and a voice for the oppressed during times of political upheaval.¹⁴

The first community radio in Africa was in Kenya, at Homa Bay on Lake Victoria in 1982. But it has been since the 1990s that community radio has really burgeoned, both in Africa and worldwide. In fact, it has grown faster than either state or commercial radio. In 11 countries surveyed across Africa, local commercial radio grew by an average of 360 percent between 2000 and 2006, whereas community radio grew by a striking 1,386 percent, on average, over the same period. For instance, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) there are now approximately 250 community radio stations whereas there were only 10 in 2000.¹⁵ In Mali, community radios grew at a rate of two new stations per month throughout the 1990s.¹⁶ Other places in Asia and Latin America have also seen remarkable community radio booms. For instance, in 1997 Nepal had only one community radio (the pioneering Radio Sagarmatha); now, around 70 percent of the population is within reach of a community station.¹⁷ In Colombia, since broadcasting liberalization in the 1990s the number of community stations has risen to around 850.¹⁸ This has been due mainly to the widespread liberalization of the airwaves, the falling costs of the necessary technology, and a thirst for alternatives to government-controlled media.

Community Radio's Distribution Across the Global South

A very general overview of the global South shows that community radio has particularly thrived in Latin America, where it has a long history, is numerically significant, and where it has arguably fulfilled more of a public service function than state broadcasters, which have been notorious for their lack of independence. Colombia, Bolivia, Mexico, and Argentina have particularly favorable pro-community broadcasting policies.¹⁹ Some estimates put the total number of community radio stations in Latin America at around 10,000, with Peru having the largest proportion and Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil in second, third, and fourth place.²⁰ If unlicensed stations are also taken into account, the overall numbers are much higher. Recent surveys by UNESCO, for example, show there are more than 10,000 community radio stations still waiting for licenses in Brazil alone.

Community radio is perhaps at its most diverse in Africa: from pastoralist stations in remote deserts, to youth music stations in urban slums. Many community radios broadcast without

licenses; and their numbers are growing.²¹ Some countries such as Eritrea and Zimbabwe have banned community radio completely, while more liberal governments, including Mali's and South Africa's, are embracing it.

Considering Africa's poverty, it is not surprising that the continent is home to high numbers of rural community radios, operating on tiny budgets, which often need to be supported by outside organizations. Radio is still the mass-medium of choice for more than two thirds of Africans, both rural and urban. This is because radio sets are inexpensive, do not rely on main power, are portable and do not require literacy.²² Total radio stations by country range from three or four in countries such as Rwanda and Kenya to countries such as South Africa with 92²³ community stations, Mali with 159,²⁴ and the DRC with more than 250. Smaller countries such as Liberia (with about 34 active community radios)²⁵ and Sierra Leone (with 24) have seen particularly large increases in recent years.²⁶

While community radio expanded rapidly in Latin America and Africa in the 1990s, in Asia it was slow to take off. In South Asia, the picture is dominated by India, which introduced pro-community radio legislation as recently as 2006 and thus opened the way for 1.1 billion more of the world's population to access it. Nepal is another recent success story for community radio. Bangladesh and Afghanistan are slowly becoming more positive: Bangladesh approved community media legislation in 2008, and in Afghanistan there are currently about 35 independently owned community stations²⁷ in a difficult but increasingly less controlled press environment. However, Pakistan and Bhutan currently prohibit non-profit based community stations, and in Sri Lanka the national broadcasting corporation, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), operates many local stations with some community radio characteristics but that are rarely critical of the government.²⁸

In Southeast Asia, Thailand tops the region's charts with about 5,000 community stations—most of them operating without licenses.²⁹ In populous Indonesia, community radio has also taken off rapidly, but the number of stations is in the hundreds rather than thousands. The Philippines counts more than 55 community radio stations independent of government and commercial interests operating outside the cities and using low powered transmitters.³⁰ Elsewhere, the regimes in Laos, Burma, Malaysia, and Vietnam continue to suppress community media in varying degrees. By contrast, Cambodia's media scene is relatively free but with only a handful of internationally-backed community radios.

Community Radio's values

Community radio is now a significant contemporary phenomenon in developing countries. Depending on the political context, it has either become a recognized and important player on the media scene or, in the context of repressive regimes, it still represents a radical, sometime clandestine, voice. In an increasingly globalized and commercialized world, community radio continues to give voice to rural people, minorities, women, the marginalized, and the poor and thus potentially represents a democratizing force. As Kevin Howley, associate professor of communication and theatre at DePauw University, has put it:

By providing local populations with access to the means of communication, community media offer a modest, but vitally important corrective to the unprecedented concentration of media ownership that undermines local cultural expression, privatizes the channels of public communication and otherwise threatens the prospects for democratic self-governance.³¹

In developing countries, community radio has a developmental mission and sees itself as uniting either geographical communities or communities of interest around common economic, cultural, or linguistic interests and themes. A typical example in Africa is Dzimwe Community Radio Station in Malawi, which operates out of four tiny rooms in a rented building with a leaky roof in a small provincial town near Lake Malawi. Dzimwe broadcasts on a relatively low-power FM signal (250 watts), is licensed to carry more talk than music and employs local people—many of whom are volunteers. It uses mainly the local language, is governed by a board representing a wide variety of local interests, allows permanent open access to the studio by local people, and gives priority to community concerns in its programming, such as subsistence farming, fishing, youth unemployment, women’s rights, and environmental issues.³² A small station such as this, with basic editing and transmission facilities, will typically cost less than \$10,000 to set up and will reach a radius of about 150 kilometers.³³

Dzimwe is typical in that it has formed and works with 28 radio listening clubs—small groups of local villagers who come together to listen to programs, comment on them, and record their own stories and observations for broadcast by the radio station. A great degree of participation is possible with community radio, which, when functioning at its best, allows listeners to make their own programs, respond to broadcasts either in person on air or via intermediary producers and presenters. Participatory programs can take the form of talk shows, round-table discussions, reading listener letters or texts on the air, and broadcasts from public locations. Local people comment by phone, by SMS, or in person on the issues of the day, on the station’s programming, or they just send greetings to friends and family members.³⁴

Citing an example from Ghana, Bruce Girard, author of many works on radio in development, says, “... especially in rural areas where people are isolated from each other ... the radio is the only medium that brings them together and contributes a sense of community ... programmes are often recorded in open village meetings and the effect of hearing one’s own and one’s neighbours’ voices on the airwaves has been profoundly empowering.”³⁵

Partly because it operates in local languages, community radio can be especially important for women listeners, who, particularly in Africa, tend to favor their mother tongues over colonial languages.³⁶

A great degree of participation is possible with community radio, which, when functioning at its best, allows listeners to make their own programs and respond to broadcasts

In some cases, community radio stations do not or cannot live up to their professed values. Often this is due to low levels of education and of pay among broadcasters. Having predominantly young, low-paid and untrained presenters and journalists opens many community radios to the charge of spreading factual errors, myths, and unsubstantiated rumors. In a recent instance in the author’s experience, one community radio in Burkina Faso contracted to make educational programs about genetically modified cotton misunderstood the science involved and mistakenly produced a series about improved hybrid seeds.

Furthermore, reliance on volunteers can lead to lack of responsible journalism, unmotivated staff (sometimes resulting in petty thefts at the station), unreliable scheduling (because the volunteer does not turn up) or—worse still—the complete hijacking of a station by a particular interest group in the community, who may have started out, benignly enough, as volunteers. Such difficulties are familiar to even the best community stations, such as Dzimwe.

Similarly, a station’s music offering can in some cases work against its professed community character. For most stations, music is the dominant format and is often presented by young DJs who play their favorite tunes and there may be no overall music playlist. Music tends to define—and limit—the audience. If the music is primarily by and for the teens and 20-year-olds, older listeners may not tune in. At best, a community radio station can affirm the community by featuring local musicians, as Radio Dondo does in rural Mozambique, where nearly 60 percent of the music it airs is by local performers.³⁷

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Despite these occasional drawbacks, community radio is now widely recognized, both by governments and the international development community, as the “third tier” of broadcasting, with the first being state and the second being commercial broadcasting.

However, in countries where community media are not officially recognized, or where legislation is still evolving, there are various hybrid models. For instance, a community radio can operate as a business but can still reflect the needs and voice of the local people it serves—as is the case at Breeze FM in Zambia. In Zimbabwe, community radios are banned, but an ingenious alternative has been found by Radio Dialogue in Bulawayo, which does what it calls “road-casting” by recording news and music on cassette and CDs and disseminating them through local taxi and bus drivers.³⁸

In Laos, which is still a one-party state, the first community station, Khoun Community Radio, was initiated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2007 as a hybrid model, which involves local level government in decision-making and oversight but which apparently retains strong levels of citizen participation and locally-relevant development information.³⁹

In various developing countries, especially conflict and disaster zones, international aid agencies specializing in media development have set up community radios from scratch where a specific community has no other access to information. Internews’s network of radios in eastern Chad for Darfuri refugees is a case in point.⁴⁰ In some countries where community radio is already recognized, some of the stations are still run by the state; for example in Mozambique 35 percent of the 60 community radios in the country are owned by the state and managed by state employees but provide community-oriented programming.⁴¹

Community Radio’s Development Impact

The fundamental value of community radio—when properly done—lies in its “community-ness”: its capacity to speak to and for a group of people to express and enrich their identity. This has been neatly described in one recent evaluation of community radio among the Maasai in Tanzania, in which a Maasai elder is quoted: “Most significant change? That we have our own radio, are updated in our own language and can communicate. You can say that it has given our identity back! Nothing less. And that changes all the rest!!!”⁴²

Community radio can often be a catalyst or a rallying point for the community for development, such as the provision of electricity, building of a community school, or neighborhood clean-up efforts. For example, in Budikote, India, broken pipes for the village water supply were promptly mended by the local authorities when Namma Dhvani Community Media Center radio recorded and aired the complaints of local women.⁴³

Many health, social, and agricultural gains can be attributed to campaigns on community radio stations. For example, in Colombia, one community radio station located in Belén de los Andaquies has helped to reinforce Belén identity and its commitment to the planting of food crops rather than coca, which many rural communities have become dependent upon. The radio station continued its programming in the face of guerilla attacks, and its children’s radio school was awarded UNICEF’s prize for children’s programming in Latin America in 2001.⁴⁴

Other success stories abound all over the world. For example, at Radio Fanaka Fana in Mali, a recent campaign to use compost to improve agriculture was so popular that people in neighboring villages outside the broadcast range erected a homemade antenna to listen to the broadcasts.⁴⁵ At Mega FM in Uganda, campaigns on voluntary counseling and testing for HIV/AIDS boost attendance at clinics to such an extent that the local health authority often runs short of testing kits.⁴⁶ And in Nepal, respect and care for the elderly has been very effectively promoted on Radio Swargadwari.⁴⁷

One of community radio’s most significant developmental impacts has been—and continues to be—the articulation and realization of human rights in their various forms. For example, in Nepal in 2005, fundamental civil rights were suspended during the 15-month regime of King Gyanendra. Despite a ban on the broadcast of news, Nepali community radios found creative ways to advocate for civil and human rights by broadcasting educational programs about the rights enshrined in the constitution and in some cases by singing the news instead of speaking it,

thus circumventing the ban.⁴⁸ They also frequently broadcast notices about the ban on news and the consequent infringement of the right to information. Girard notes that, as a result, Nepalis “did not forget their rights—they actually became more aware of them.”⁴⁹

Other recent examples of rights work by community radios include campaigning for gay and lesbian rights by community radios in South Africa;⁵⁰ educating and mobilizing villagers to protect their forestry resources from logging companies in Mali;⁵¹ campaigning against female circumcision and forced marriage and even providing a safe-house for individual young women fleeing these practices in Maasai land in Tanzania;⁵² and mobilizing local people to march in protest against police inaction in the face of increases in violent crime in Peru.⁵³

Finally, the role of community radio in peace-building has often proved strong. For example, community radio stations in Colombia have daily programs for hostages being held by insurgents;⁵⁴ Radio Maendeleo in the DRC continues to provide information about local fighting, troop movements, and road blocks for the troubled area of South Kivu;⁵⁵ and Radio DXUP in the Philippines has been described as “balm in troubled areas” as it has helped inter-communal peace-building among Christians and Muslims in Mindanao.⁵⁶

Governments and Community Radio

Community radio is different from all other types of broadcasting. It can be suppressed or outlawed even in otherwise liberal media environments, often because of its real or perceived connections with minority interests, such as tribal, religious, or political groupings that can potentially foment violence. For instance, Nigeria has been slow to legalize community radio stations because they have been perceived as a focus for ethnic unrest in certain states. Pakistan still has a blanket restriction on community radio for similar reasons.⁵⁷

Community radios are often a thorn in the side of governments, voicing dissent and minority views that challenge state power and the interests of ruling elites. Authorities sometimes try to buy off community radios, as happens in the DRC, where provincial governors are known to give a regular subsidy to local radio stations in exchange for positive coverage.

Many countries do not recognize the particularity of community radios in media legislation, categorizing them with larger-scale commercial stations and obliging them to pay the same taxes and license fees, without recognizing how punitive such fees often can be. For example, Radio Simli, a community station in Ghana, was shut down and its equipment confiscated due to its inability to pay steep license fees— a \$100 application fee, a \$2,000 frequency fee, and an \$800 annual fee.⁵⁸

In order to have “community” status, stations are often barred from collecting advertising revenue, which means that poorer operators, especially in rural areas, are generally disadvantaged. Sometimes they suffer special restrictions regarding local language usage, for fear of ethnic divisions; this is the case, for example, in Tanzania. In Senegal, community radio stations may not sell advertising. In Cameroon and Uganda (among many others) the law does not recognize community radio as distinct from private commercial broadcasters, and in the DRC, community radios can generate no more than 40 percent of their incomes from advertising, so as not to compete with local commercial stations. In India and in Niger, by law community radio stations may not broadcast news.

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Radio spectrum allocation is an issue in many countries. Community stations often have to compete with commercial stations for frequencies. The fair distribution of space on the spectrum, which is a valuable and scarce resource, ideally requires special mechanisms to reach beyond commercial and state-controlled allocations to guarantee access for civil society and community-based organizations.⁵⁹ As Steve Buckley *et al.* point out, Benin is a good example of fair allocation of radio spectrum that takes into account the entitlements of communities:

The licensing process for community radio starts with the HAAC [Benin’s independent regulatory body] publishing the list of available frequencies based on its frequency map

and issuing a published call for applications from all sectors...Applications are processed and frequencies allocated based on the proposed program content and viability of the service.⁶⁰

Other positive examples include Mali, which was the first country in Africa to provide a specific licensing category of community broadcasting, defined as “not for profit and owned by the local community.” South Africa, Venezuela, and Colombia also have reduced or waived license fees for non-commercial radio and simplified license application procedures.

Case-Study: Impact of Community Radio in India

The story of community radio in India is an interesting one since India has made enormous developmental leaps over the last 20 years *without* allowing community radios to operate until very recently (not until 2006 were NGOs and other civil society organizations allowed to apply for licenses, though educational licenses were available earlier).

Before community radio, the Indian airwaves were dominated by All India Radio (AIR) which, in many ways, is a model of public service broadcasting, reaching more than 98 percent of the population, serving 24 distinct language groups, 146 dialects, and with more than 80 local stations in its network. But, as Ashish Sen and Ramnath Bhat, community media organizers, argue, AIR is the product and the expression of a centralized broadcasting tradition with its roots in British colonial control¹. Central government has long feared dissent and challenges to national unity in this diverse and populous nation. Though ordinary Indians may have felt well-served with information brought to them from the center courtesy of AIR, historically they have not had media channels through which to express their local concerns. Gradually, however, the first commercial stations and community stations (educational institutions only) were permitted licenses in 1999 and 2003 respectively, following intense and prolonged lobbying by civil society. The law allowing NGOs and civil society groups community licenses finally followed in 2006.

Thus, in theory, the poorest Indians now have a media tool with which to express themselves, rather than just passively receiving information. As UNESCO has pointed out, community radio in India has many unique advantages over AIR and private FM in terms of development and empowerment. Programs, nearly always in the local languages, deal with local issues involving ordinary people so that villagers and townspeople understand what they are about. Although the government’s broadcasting code still bans news, audio programs have exposed corruption. For example, at community radio *Mandakini Ki Awaaz* (the Voice of Mandikini) in Bhanaj, Uttarakhand State, north India, Manvender Singh Negi, program coordinator said, “Our most significant impact has been creating transparency in local governance. Once we found discrepancies in the accounts of works sanctioned by the village development officer and talked about it on our radio. People confronted the sarpanch (elected village head) who removed the officer.”²

As a 2007 UNESCO report put it, “Just hearing themselves on radio is an empowering experience for people, who realize that this, truly, can be their voice and help them get a better deal from the government and other castes. It is the first time Dalits, tribals and women have found an opportunity to speak out.”³

Despite recent pro-community broadcasting legislation, the expected explosion of community radios in India has not yet happened (some commentators and even government ministers predicted up to 5,000 new stations by 2008⁴ but recent surveys have counted around 70 to date⁵). The news ban is a major factor.⁶ Other obstacles still standing in community radio’s way in India include lengthy application procedures; expensive transmission equipment only from authorized dealers; limits to the power of transmitters and to the height of towers; the continuing ban on broadcasting news; and the requirement that NGOs and civil society groups be registered for at least three years prior to applying for licenses¹.

So it is too early to tell what the developmental impact of the new wave of India’s community radios—if wave it is—will be. But it is clearly not yet the popular revolution in broadcasting that many advocates had wanted.

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1. Sen, A. and R. Bhat (2008). India: sculpting the identity of community radio. Community Radio in Asia: putting people in charge. C. A. Arnaldo. Metro Manila, Tambuli Foundation.
 2. <http://www.indiatoday.com/itoday/20070305/radio.html>
 3. UNESCO (2007). “India to establish 4000 community radios stations under new community radio policy “. Retrieved 3rd September 2010, from http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=24250&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
 4. Sen, A. and R. Bhat (2008). The challenges to community radio in India. Community Radio in Asia: putting people in charge. C. A. Arnaldo. Metro Manila, Tambuli Foundation.
 5. Of the operational channels, 52 are educational institutions, 15 are non-governmental organizations, three are *Krishi Vigyan Kendras*, and one is a State-level Agricultural University. Tamil Nadu leads the country with 13 community radios, followed by Uttar Pradesh with 9, Maharashtra with 7, Karnataka with six and Delhi with five. Sixteen other states have one to four community radios each. See *Indiantelevision.com* (2010). “71 community radio stations operational in India.” Retrieved 3rd September 2010, from <http://www.indiantelevision.com/headlines/y2k10/aug/aug60.php>., Malaviya, S. (2010). “India: Community Radio Stations Multiply, but Will They Thrive? .” India Special Report: Community Radio. Retrieved 3rd September, from <http://www.audiencescapes.org/india-special-report-india-special-report-community-radio-sustainability>.
 6. However, the Indian government recently clarified that certain categories of news are permitted on radio, including sports news and commentaries, information on traffic and weather conditions, coverage of cultural events and festivals, information on academic events, public announcements pertaining to utilities like electricity and water supply, disaster warnings and health alerts.

In Search of a Business Model for Community Radio

One of the main challenges for community radio is finding economic sustainability. This is true even of commercial entertainment-oriented radio, but even more so for radio services aspiring to public service and development.

A non-profit structure is part of what distinguishes community radios from private commercial stations. But, as Fairbairn points out:

... being non-profit does not mean that you have to be poor. The main difference between commercial and community media is that profit made by commercial media benefits individuals or investors, and profit made by community media is returned into service provision or used for the benefit of the community.⁶¹

There are five basic options for funding radio: advertising, donors (international aid and loans), community-based income-generation (including diaspora contributions), patronage, and state aid.

Advertising

Generating revenue from advertising is an obvious and widely used strategy. Many community stations actively seek local and national advertisers to help sustain themselves, from paid announcements by traditional healers to long-term sponsorship from large soft drink or mobile phone companies. Many community stations will not carry advertisements for products or services that are considered culturally or morally unacceptable. For example, Radio Madanpokhara in Nepal will broadcast advertisements—but not for cigarettes, alcohol, or gambling.

As previously noted, national laws sometimes do not permit advertising on community radio. But even in countries where it is allowed, there are several problems with the commercial funding model. From a developmental point of view, the poorer your audience, the less advertising revenue you are likely to attract, and therefore the less economically viable your rural station will be. In urban areas there is often strong competition with commercial radio stations. For example, in Kolkata, India, RadioJU at Jadavpur University has found most potential clients are only interested in music programming targeted at young people. The community radios also complain that the playing field is not level, as official rules bar them from soliciting corporate social responsibility funding from multinationals and other big companies, so the station is left to compete for advertising revenue with commercial channels.⁶²

There also is the problem of quality of content—the more entertaining, sensational, or controversial the content, the bigger the audience, and the more advertisers a station is likely to attract. For instance, JoziFM, a large community station in Soweto, South Africa, with an entertainment and youth focus has been very successful at generating advertising but has been criticized for neglecting its educational responsibility.⁶³

Furthermore, in a liberalized and plural broadcasting environment a situation can quickly be reached where too many stations are chasing too few advertisers. For example, in Ecuador in the 1990s, the number of radio stations increased by 300 percent between 1991 and 1996, but the amount spent on radio advertising increased by less than 20 percent in the same period. This inevitably resulted in a financial squeeze, and in order to survive, new stations invested as little as possible in expensive news reporting and programming and resorted to inexpensive automated formats, “becoming little more than on-air juke-boxes,” as Girard has noted.⁶⁴

Established stations with a commitment to news and developmental programming were obliged to cut costs. This pattern can also be seen in Africa, where national multimedia groups with holdings in print, television, internet, and radio are already squeezing out local radio, with a corresponding lowering of standards of content across the board.

Small stations often find it difficult to generate advertising revenue from advertisers beyond their immediate vicinity or to attract big firms that may be skeptical that an advertisement placed on a community radio’s airwaves will reach large numbers of potential consumers or that it will be broadcast reliably and regularly. Often community radios have insufficient knowledge of the numbers and profiles of their audience to make a convincing case to advertisers.

Small stations often find it difficult to generate advertising revenue from advertisers beyond their immediate vicinity or to attract big firms.

Some initiatives have recently been set up to tackle these problems. For example, in the DRC, a donor-funded media and democracy program⁶⁵ is currently supporting training partnerships between audience-research consultancies and community radios to help the radio stations better research their audiences and approach potential advertisers with realistic assessments of their audiences. Another interesting initiative is the Protore Advertising Network, initiated by the Danish media support NGO, International Media Support (IMS). Launched in early 2010, the Protore network aims to help “professional independent media” that have websites to optimize the potential for generating income beyond their immediate domestic markets. The idea is that by convincing hundreds of media sites to gather around this one “social purpose global advertising network,” advertisers will want to place their advertisements there to reach more viewers. This could be an exciting opportunity for small radio stations who, through their websites, already try to reach beyond their immediate geographical vicinity—for example to their extended community in a diaspora. Research by IMS in Sudan, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Vietnam found that there is strong revenue potential from this non-domestic advertising. Typically 40-70 percent of visitors to online media are located in their respective diasporas, with those in Europe and North America generating the bulk of traffic.⁶⁶

Donor Funding

International grants, given either bilaterally or through NGO intermediaries, are what sustain—or help to sustain—a large proportion of rural, semi-rural and shanty-town-based community and

associative radio stations.⁶⁷ In theory this is not sustainable in the long term, as donors’ funding cycles rarely last longer than five years, and a small radio station needs long-term funding to cover maintenance and running costs. Many community radio projects have foundered when donors pull out, for example in Haiti where an NGO, Creative Associates International, helped build capacity at several community stations initiated by UNESCO, but once the project was closed, a large proportion of the assisted stations did not survive.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, donor support for community broadcasting is a reality and is the main reason why community radio stations have sprung up in the numbers that they have, and why they continue to endure throughout the poorest parts of the world. For instance, in Nepal there are now about 150 community radio stations, and, on average they cover 60 to 70 percent of their operational costs from sponsored radio programs supported by NGOs and some other governmental local

Donor support for community broadcasting is the main reason why community radio stations have sprung up in the numbers that they have, and why they continue to endure throughout the poorest parts of the world.

agencies such as the District Development Committee and the District Health Office. The rest of their income comes from local advertisements, and contributions from local communities.⁶⁹

Some of the largest donors to community radio over the last 30 years have included UNICEF, UNESCO, the Open Society Foundations, USAID, Sweden’s SIDA, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In some cases a development NGO, or a religious foundation will support the capital costs for equipment, a studio, and a building; in other cases local and international NGOs will sponsor particular educational broadcasts, such as a weekly program on women’s health, or a discrete campaign, such

as polio vaccination. This sponsorship can come in the form of payment for airtime, by covering the costs of training or for buying new equipment, such as a CD player or some solar panels. Sometimes sponsorship is as basic as buying enough diesel for the radio’s generator to allow it to remain on the air for the time required to run the campaign.

Community radio managers are often adept at building relationships with a number of different donors and trying various strategies such as turning core support into program sponsorship or capacity-building—thereby in effect sustaining a station for many years on donor money. On this point, Linje Manyozo, of the London School of Economics, makes the following perceptive comment: “It is often the case that communities own the rural radio structure (equipment, identity, name), but their access to quality and community-centred programming relies on funding from donors—who, in reality, own the station’s ‘community-ness’ and sustainability.”⁷⁰ Manyozo even talks of “Eurocentric *NGO-ification* of participation” in this context.⁷¹

An example of this “NGO-ification” can arguably be seen in Nepal, where some commentators, such as Kishor Pradhan, from Panos South Asia, have asserted that radio

stations' dependency on sponsored programs from the same sources fails to bring enough diversity or local content to so-called community stations: "Most community radio stations [in Nepal] broadcast news bulletins and other programmes produced and distributed by the same production units in Kathmandu, such as the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal, Communication Corner, Equal Access, Antenna Foundation⁷², BBC World Service Trust, and BBC Nepali Service."⁷³

Although the extent of dependence on donors varies widely around the world, almost everywhere the distortion that can result from donor dominance is a real cause for concern. Bill Siemering, a long-time radio veteran and founder of Developing Radio Partners, acknowledges that "the program schedule can be dominated by NGOs that will pay for the time." But Siemering believes "it would take quite a lot of outside programming for [a] station to lose its 'community-ness.'" He advises that community stations "should only accept sponsored programs from NGOs that are consistent with the station's mission and values."⁷⁴

For some time, donors have been pondering the sustainability conundrum themselves, and have been looking at the potential of loans to provide capital for independent media outlets to build themselves into viable long-term businesses without the need to rely on grants forever. The Media Development Loan Fund (MDLF), a New York-based not-for-profit corporation started in 1995 with an initial grant from philanthropist George Soros, describes itself as "a mission-driven investment fund for independent news outlets in countries with a history of media oppression."⁷⁵ With backing from bilateral aid donors and some of the large philanthropies, such as the MacArthur Foundation, this fund provides low-cost loans, equity, and know-how to news outlets in Africa, Asia, Latin America, southeastern Europe, and the countries of the former Soviet Union. The aim is to help independent media outlets to build sustainable and well-organized businesses.⁷⁶

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On the face of it, the MDLF or similar social investment loan schemes would seem an obvious option for helping to sustain community radios. But the difficulty is that community stations rarely make any profits and are therefore unlikely to want to commit to servicing a loan, no matter how low the interest rate. Community radios in poor countries are invariably too small to be able to benefit from loan schemes on their own and the MDLF has never provided a loan to a community radio station.⁷⁷

However, a notable success story is the radio loan pool established by the KBR68H radio news agency in Indonesia, which is itself a beneficiary of a loan from the MDLF. KBR68H is a successful development-oriented news agency in Jakarta, which began a small loan program for its radio station network members, now numbering more than 600.⁷⁸ Through this program, stations in the region have access to low interest loans for those that wish to upgrade their equipment or

The U.S. Take on Community Radio in the Developing World

For U.S. funders and implementers of international media development programs, community radio presents an attractive target of opportunity.

“We believe it’s vitally important,” Patrick Butler, vice president for programs at the International Center for Journalists, said in an interview. Community radio, he said, “reaches people in places other media don’t reach.”¹

Mark Koenig, senior media advisor with USAID, agrees: “It’s really the prime way of reaching the people in the countryside.”² Koenig was referring to the use of community radio for development projects in general, not just development of media.

By its nature, community radio is “decentralized . . . natural flowing,” which is why “people with different development objectives find it useful,” Koenig said.

USAID has funded several projects involving community radio around the world, including projects run by Internews in Afghanistan, Sudan, Haiti, Central African Republic, Indonesia, Chad, and other countries, where community radio stations are often the only source of information for their local communities.

Internews has built a network of 42 local, independently operated radio stations throughout Afghanistan and trained local journalists—women and men— to report in their communities.

“These radio stations become central to their communities, not just as a way to receive news, but as a way to participate and speak out on issues that matter,” said Marjorie Rouse, Internews senior vice president for programs. “For women, youth, and others without a traditional ‘voice’ in Afghan society, the community stations provide an outlet.”³

In Southern Sudan, Radio al Mujtama Fi Kurmuk is one of five community radio stations built by Internews. The local staff had no previous radio or computer skills, but after six months of training and mentoring, they were writing, recording, editing, and producing their own local-language programming. Run entirely by community members, the station has become a trusted source of news. “During the war we had no information, but now we have the information we need through the radio,” said Habiba Ali Herala Adurhaman, a local resident.

In Mali, where there are about 300 community radio stations, USAID has worked with at least 100, Koenig said. Other places where USAID has funded community radio projects include Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Guinea. In addition to working with Internews, USAID partners with several other NGOs and media development implementers, such as the Hirondelle Foundation and Search for Common Ground.

USAID and the Education Development Center are funding Sudan Radio Service, which

started broadcasting on shortwave and now has an FM station in Juba. “One hundred percent of the production is done by Sudanese,” chief of party Jon Newstrom said in an e-mail.⁴

Koenig estimates that USAID spends between 2 million and several million dollars a year in projects involving community radio, but it is hard to come up with a precise figure because USAID’s contracts are not broken down by media sector but rather by components of projects, such as staff and equipment, in order to give implementers as much flexibility as possible. Also, broader media projects often have a community radio component, but the expenditure for that specific piece would not be broken out separately.

IREX also does a considerable amount of work in community radio. Francesca Sawalha, chief of party for IREX’s media program in Jordan, wrote in an e-mail about the challenges her organization faces in supporting community radio there: “In Jordan—and the rest of the Arab world—the regulatory framework is a serious obstacle to the development of community radio. Fees are prohibitive, licensing application requirements a nightmare, and the actual licensing authority rests with the Cabinet, which can reject any application without giving any justification.”⁵

Butler estimates that about 15 to 20 percent of ICFJ’s programs involve community radio. As examples of the kind of work ICFJ supports in community radio, Butler cited helping radio stations in Guatemala create a platform for multiple stations to share content, supporting a station in East Timor that distributes a national radio program on CDs, and training Bolivian radio journalists.

In India, Knight Fellow Shubharanshu Choudhary is helping citizen journalists in a remote area of India learn to use mobile phones to send and receive audio news updates. “Shu is using mobile phones *as* community radio,” Butler said.

Because community radio tends to be staffed mostly by volunteers, the quality of broadcasts can differ widely. But, as Butler put it, “community radio is the voice of the community, and it’s not fair to expect” the stations to have professional journalism standards.

But there are rewards and successes as well. Butler described how a community radio station that ICFJ has worked with in Bolivia broadcast news about the lack of ambulances. After Bolivian President Evo Morales heard the story on the radio, he delivered seven ambulances to the community.

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1. Interview with CIMA manager and editor Don Podesta, February 24, 2011, Washington, DC.
 2. Interview with CIMA manager and editor Don Podesta, March 3, 2011, Washington, DC.
 3. E-mail to CIMA, March 22, 2011.
 4. E-mail to CIMA, March 6, 2011.
 5. E-mail to CIMA, March 2, 2011.

working capital. Nearly four years on, 90 loans have been provided across Indonesia and the region, totaling around \$200,000. Of these, only 2 percent are non-performing loans. Such loans are not necessarily given to community media, but these days many community driven media have become not-for-profit small enterprises—hybrids, as it were—generating a little income from announcements and sometimes from side businesses (e.g. copy services, internet café etc.).⁷⁹ The KBR68H example shows that when small radios are linked together in a network they can sometimes take advantage of the loan model.

Although none of the stations receiving loans from KBR68H are strictly community radios, a tiny community radio called Pikon Ane, in the remote mountains of Papua, is part of this network, and KBR68H helped launch the station by accessing grant funding.

More recently, two media loan programs have emerged in Africa: the Southern Africa Media Development Fund and the West Africa Media Development Fund.

Community-Based Income Generation

Some community radios manage to raise a significant portion of their budget through community-based schemes of various kinds. This can include small levies on radio audience members, announcements (births, marriages, deaths, lost and found), music requests and birthday greetings, fund raising by diaspora communities, income from spin-offs like cyber cafés, and other activities such as planting vegetable gardens and rearing livestock in the radio station’s precincts. Other costs such as building maintenance may be met through voluntary contributions of community labor and materials.

Inspiring tales of community sacrifice and volunteerism abound in the community radio literature. For instance, in Nepal, Radio Madanpokhara has largely managed to sustain itself with handfuls of rice donated by the community.

Inspiring tales of community sacrifice and volunteerism abound in the community radio literature. For instance, in Nepal, Radio Madanpokhara has largely managed to sustain itself with handfuls of rice donated by the community.⁸⁰ Other income-generating ideas have come from new technology. For example, Radio Maendeleo in the DRC—having received a satellite Internet connection thanks to UK aid money, through the Panos Institute—now acts as a local Internet service provider, and generates income for itself by charging local NGOs in the neighborhood for connection to the system.⁸¹

A large “parent radio” is sometimes required to help set up and mentor smaller ones to make this network model function. One example can be found, again in the DRC, where Radio Okapi (not a community radio but a nationwide peace radio, jointly run by the UN and the Hirondelle Foundation) has helped to support and train a network of independent community radios throughout the DRC. Many of these radios existed before Radio Okapi began but were so small

that they were struggling to sustain themselves financially and managerially. Radio Okapi has provided training and mentoring to 27 of these smaller Congolese stations in marketing skills so that they can earn a little more from local advertising, thereby sustaining themselves financially. This is partly as a result of donor pressure on Radio Okapi to allow other stations within the DRC to share the benefits of its large international funding, but Radio Okapi benefits too, as the small radio partners carry its signal beyond its normal footprint, into remote areas.

Patronage

Another option for supporting community radio is patronage—a strategy that calls into question the very definition and aim of community radio—but is nevertheless a reality. Often patronage manifests itself by individual business people establishing radio stations under the guise of a community radio, then, effectively, running them as private profitable businesses. This happens in Colombia, for instance, where, although the law requires community radios to have elected community members on their boards, the government is unable to monitor or enforce the law and communities are not sufficiently well-organized to resist. Girard estimates that up to 50 percent of stations in Colombia are effectively controlled by a single institution or individual and used for their own purposes.⁸²

More blatantly, politicians will start or buy radio stations to promote their political agendas and their party's line. One example is the chain of small stations called Radios Liberté in the DRC, which is owned by the now outlawed presidential candidate, Jean-Pierre Bemba. In some small provincial towns in the DRC a branch of Radio Liberté is the only radio station available—in which case it becomes the de facto voice of the community, though it hardly reflects the diversity of views existing within it. More benignly, there are three community radio stations in the town of Ségou, Mali, two of which are owned by political parties: Radio Jamana Foko for the ruling Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA), and Radio Sido for the opposition African Solidarity for Democracy and Independence (SADI) party. The third radio is run by a women's network.⁸³ They all run educational and public service programs for the community and, because there are three in the town, the local audience is assured a diversity of views.

Although the patronage option may be “sustainable” it is rarely conducive to truthful and balanced journalism or genuine community participation. The only way out of the patronage system is finding alternative business models and then running a radio station along sound editorial and managerial lines.

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State Aid

The last option—and this is only available to some types of radio in some countries—is state aid. For example, South Africa has the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) which is “a statutory development agency for promoting and ensuring media development and diversity ... to enable historically disadvantaged communities and persons not adequately served by the media to gain access to the media.”⁸⁴ Community radio is able to access grant-funding through this agency which, in turn, is funded through a share of profits from some of the bigger commercial news enterprises in South Africa. As of March 2010, the MDDA had supported 282 small media outlets and disbursed a cumulative total of 102 million rand (\$15 million) since 2004.

An example of a community radio beneficiary in South Africa is Moletsi Community Radio, in Limpopo Province, which was able to build new premises and upgrade “from a tiny four-roomed house, to [a] thirteen-roomed building”⁸⁵ with an MDDA grant in 2008. In the case of the MDDA in South Africa, the funding comes ultimately from bigger commercial media profits—an example of bigger media being “taxed” to support the smaller and poorer outlets.

Other examples of aid from government sources to community radio include a tax on cable or telecommunication operators (Colombia); government funds made available to support training, equipment purchases, and/or provide indirect funding such as fee and tax waivers (Venezuela, Bolivia, and Colombia); government funds set aside for training, technical support, and research and development (Bangladesh).⁸⁶

The danger with state funding is, of course, that community radio can lose its independence and its ability to hold local and national government to account. An example of this allegedly occurred recently in Paraguay, where it was reported in late 2009, that President Fernando Lugo’s government had purchased advertisements on 51 community radio stations. The Paraguayan government reportedly sought to use the stations for self-promotion and to counter the independent press. Government payments of more than \$400 a month had allegedly become an important source of income for these stations.⁸⁷

If community radios accept government funding, they normally also seek other funds, so as not to be heavily dependent on official sources. Ideally, government funds are distributed by independent bodies and are properly regulated, as is the case in South Africa.

Despite the existence of all these options, long-term financial stability remains elusive for most of the community radio sector, particularly those offering minority language programs, community services, serious news, genuine opportunities for local participation, and educational and developmental programs. The reality is that some degree of international, donor, and/or state

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funding is probably always going to be necessary for “pro-poor” radio. Most community radios will continue to sustain—or aspire to sustain—themselves via the “three-legged funding model,”⁸⁸ in which income generation is spread across three sources, albeit with an emphasis on the first:

- donors, including NGO and government funding programs
- communities
- advertisers.

Voicing the Rights of Community Broadcasters

AMARC

The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, known by its French acronym AMARC,⁸⁹ is an international non-governmental organization set up in 1983 to serve the community radio movement. It has about 4,000 members and associates in 115 countries, an international secretariat in Montréal, Canada, and regional offices covering Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Its aim is to “advocate for the right to communicate at the international, national, local and neighbourhood levels and defend and promote the interests of the community radio movement through solidarity, networking and cooperation.”⁹⁰

AMARC is run by an international board elected at general assemblies every four years. There are regional offices, with their own boards in Dakar, Buenos Aires, Brussels, and Kathmandu. The associative structure is based on membership and is designed to be loose and consultative. Regional and global assemblies are often vibrant and inspirational,⁹¹ according to attendees, who are usually a mix of community broadcasters, grassroots activists, academics, and NGO representatives. Most of these conferences result in declarations on communication rights, and specific resolutions on regional issues. For example, the most recent regional AMARC Asia-Pacific conference in February 2010 in Bangalore endorsed a number of resolutions on topics including human rights violations in the Philippines, removing the ban on news in the recently adopted Indian community radio legislation, and simplifying license application procedures.⁹²

The effectiveness of AMARC varies from one region to another. AMARC-Africa has suffered from funding problems, corruption scandals, and leadership crises over the last decade and has existed in little more than name since it closed its regional office in Johannesburg in 2006.⁹³ Laudable plans to establish an Africa-wide news agency and a community radio equipment fund with a large grant from the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) unfortunately came to nothing during these difficult years. However according to Steve Buckley, AMARC’s former President, a turning point occurred at its regional assembly in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire, in 2009, and AMARC-Africa is now in the process of being re-launched with a regional office in Dakar, new statutes, a new board, and a more decentralized and membership-led approach.⁹⁴

The effectiveness of AMARC varies from one region to another. AMARC-Africa has suffered from funding problems, corruption scandals, and leadership crises over the last decade

By contrast, the Latin American chapter historically has been relatively well-organized and dynamic. A seasoned communication specialist, Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron says: “The work of AMARC Latin America has grown in effectiveness and prestige, although not in resources.

The network has been able to do much with very little, influencing regional organizations and national governments to legitimize the right to communicate and, eventually, to draft legislation and regulation that will protect and favor the development of community media.”⁹⁵

Meanwhile, AMARC’s Asia-Pacific region, which originated in Indonesia but is now coordinated from Kathmandu, is best known for its regional and global conferences, which provide a forum for community radios to congregate and share knowledge and issues. While sometimes wishing it would do more, members in the region nevertheless feel it provides support in the sense that it facilitates solidarity and a forum for raising the voice or the importance of the community radios in various social and development sectors. AMARC also issues statements and press releases when a community radio is being troubled by the state or other parties.⁹⁶

Funding for AMARC comes from members themselves and from a range of international donors such as Oxfam Netherlands and Québec, the Ford Foundation, FAO, UNESCO, the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), and others.⁹⁷ But despite a wide range of donor funders, AMARC operates on an annual income of just a little over \$900,000 per year.

AMARC produces training resources and practical manuals for broadcasters and community organizers wishing to set up radio stations.⁹⁸ It does important lobbying work on behalf of community radio and also has helped to achieve some policy breakthroughs. For example AMARC was hailed as a “backbone in time of crisis” by the Nepali community radio movement during the 2005 news ban.⁹⁹ A few recent international and country level achievements to which AMARC has contributed include:

- In 2010, the United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of expression recommended that member states use AMARC principles in legislating for community media.
- In 2010, the Nigerian government, after almost a decade of lobbying from AMARC and other organizations, such as Nigeria Community Radio Coalition, gave the go-ahead for community radio licensing.¹⁰⁰
- In 2010, the government of Bangladesh approved community radio for the first time.
- In 2009, Argentina’s senate voted in a new media law, which now includes community radio and media pluralism provisions, partly thanks to lobbying by AMARC.
- In 2007, in Uruguay, a law on community radio drafted by AMARC Uruguay and widely considered to be a model of good practice was approved.¹⁰¹

National Networks

National networks to support community radio exist all over the world, some explicitly affiliated to AMARC, and some not. If community radios do not have effective representation at a national level, AMARC can provide some technical support and solidarity, as it has done in Nepal and

South Africa. But, as Girard points out, “For most of the 110 countries in which it has members the Association [AMARC] is more valued for global and regional research initiatives, for example identifying good models of legislation, than for any direct national level intervention.”¹⁰²

For instance, in Peru there is the National Radio Network, representing around 2,000 stations. In Mali, hundreds of community radios are organized under Union of Free Radio and Television Broadcasters (URTEL, in the French acronym), which helps to safeguard independent radio’s rights and coordinates training and other opportunities for broadcasters. Most of Sierra Leone’s community and independent radios are members of its Independent Radio Network, which shares programming and promotes a unified ethical code across its membership. In Nepal there is the Association of Community Radio Broadcasters as well as the Community Radio Support Center of the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists.

The fortunes of many of these umbrella organizations rise and fall according to internal dynamics, political changes, and donor preferences. Many do very good work, but the challenge of coordinating hundreds of disparate, often far-flung community stations, each with an innate resistance to being controlled, is very real.

The fortunes of many of these umbrella organizations rise and fall according to internal dynamics, political changes, and donor preferences.

The proliferation of such umbrella groups themselves can be bewildering. For example in the DRC, there are two national coordination groups for independent radios, the Congo Association of Community Radios, ARCO, and the Congo Federation of Community Radio Stations, FRPC,¹⁰³ and at least six provincial groupings (RATECO, REMACOB, REMACPO, REMACK, RATEPROKA¹⁰⁴ and CMACK¹⁰⁵), not counting the additional coalitions of women journalists and other breakaway provincial groups.¹⁰⁶ This situation can be both useful and frustrating for donors: useful to have a single group through which to monitor and to channel support to many different radio stations, yet frustrating when there are internal power struggles, leadership conflicts, and squabbles about resources.

Other Support Organizations and Networks

Apart from national umbrella bodies, various organizations—both international and national—help community radios to network, find financial support, access research and policy information, and build their internal capacities. Among international NGOs and institutions supporting community radio are the family of Panos Institutes, Free Voice and Radio Netherlands Training Center, Radio France Internationale, Deutsche Welle, MediaAfrica.net, the Communication Initiative Network, Internews, Freeplay Foundation, Developing Radio Partners, Farm Radio International, Search for Common Ground, BBC World Service Trust, Open Society Foundations, and UNESCO.

The Impact of Digital Communications Technology on Community Radio

It is universally acknowledged that radio (arguably an “old” ICT) is now converging with newer information and communications technologies such that the distinctions between these technologies are becoming blurred. People are listening in ever-increasing numbers to radio on their computers via the Internet, on their MP3 players through podcasts, and on their mobile phones. Some radio stations no longer broadcast in the conventional sense but exist only online, while blogs and other social media are challenging notions of who and what a journalist is, and what constitutes news and content. While the developing world still faces huge challenges in terms of access to new ICTs, digital technologies are a reality that most community radios wish to embrace and that is gradually changing the way community broadcasting is done.

Community Radio and the Internet

Girard¹⁰⁷ has usefully identified three ways in which the Internet and radio can work together in a developmental context:

1. Internet as support to radio networking and exchanges
2. Radio as a gateway to the Internet for the community
3. Internet as a link for migrants to their home communities, via radio.

The Internet (including e-mail) is able to facilitate much greater exchanges and networking among community radios, making it possible to do joint reporting, share tools and information, distribute urgent appeals or alerts about infringements of journalists’ rights, and end the isolation of even the most remote community station. One well-known example of such a network is the Agencia Informativa Pulsar in Latin America, which is an online radio news agency that aims to “facilitate community radio stations’ access to reliable, relevant and radio-worthy information through a proposal that unites the radio with new technologies.” Founded in 1995 in Quito, Ecuador, it is now run by AMARC’s Latin America/Caribbean section, has funding from UNESCO, and has subscribers in 54 countries.¹⁰⁸

Gateway projects use radio to extend the reach of the Internet to those hard-to-reach communities not yet connected to the “information superhighway.” Probably the most famous example of this is Kothmale Community Radio and Media Center in Sri Lanka, which pioneered the technique of “radio browsing.” This is a radio program whose presenters surf the Web in search of answers to listeners’ queries—aiming to make Web-based information meaningful to local people who do not speak English (the dominant language of the Internet) and who have neither the time, knowledge, nor connectivity to sift through the terabytes of information on the Web to find what they need.¹⁰⁹ The Kothmale project also has a mobile telecenter in the form of an auto-rickshaw that travels from village to village, broadcasting the station’s programs and offering community

members a taste of the Internet. This auto-rickshaw or “e-tuktuk,” can navigate steep mountain passes, is equipped with an Internet-ready laptop computer, a power supply unit, a digital camera, a scanner, a phone, and a battery-operated printer, so that local people can make use of the mobile studio’s capabilities when it visits their community.¹¹⁰

The Internet is a potential solution to the challenge of scaling up community radio so that voices of community radios can be raised at the national, regional, and international levels. When community audio is broadcast on the Web it can reach migrants and members of that community’s diaspora all over the world, connecting them with home, keeping cultural traditions and languages alive, and helping to raise support from migrants abroad for development projects back in the home community. An example of this is Radio Rurale Kayes in Mali, which now streams its programs on the Web¹¹¹ and which has long existed partly for—and partly due to the support from—migrants from the Kayes region working in France. A European Union grant has even made it possible for all legal African migrants in Europe to take advantage of a free Internet radio set called Diasporadio, via an NGO called Afritude Europa.¹¹²

More and more community radios are coming online every year, which is evidence of the huge demand for the Internet among broadcasters. For instance, about 30 percent of community radios in West Africa now have Internet connectivity according to a survey in 2008 by the Panos Institute of West Africa¹¹³ (This contrasts with a much higher rate among commercial stations of about 72 percent, across the region).

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But there are still major impediments to Internet access. In West Africa, radio stations surveyed in the Panos study quoted the slowness of their connection as their main problem; secondly the cost; thirdly the problem of frequent electricity outages; and fourthly old computer equipment.¹¹⁴ Even though costs are gradually coming down, language barriers, lack of computer literacy, and lack of appropriate and meaningful content are other factors that complicate efforts to incorporate the Internet into programming.¹¹⁵ A third of the 108 community radios surveyed in West Africa for the Panos study did not possess a computer at all; only six of them had their own websites. The great majority (77 percent) said they did not stream their audio content for technical and costs reasons. None of the community radios in this survey made their programs available online in the form of podcasts.

For many small stations, there are pitfalls to connectivity beyond just the difficulty and cost of getting online. “Since our radio has been connected to the Internet, our telephone bills are four times higher but I’ve also seen that we communicate four times less with our community,” Zane Ibrahim of Bush Radio, South Africa said.¹¹⁶

Networks held together only by an expensive and often unreliable internet connection may not be very resilient. For instance, AMARC-Africa set up the Simbani News and Information Agency for

Community Radios in 2003 with support from DFID and the FAO, but it foundered, due in part to financial mismanagement at AMARC- Africa, but probably also because there are still few grassroots stations in Africa with the time, expertise, and money to access, adapt, and translate online content for their particular audiences.

Some of the first rush of digital enthusiasm has now been tempered by experience. For instance, it has been suggested that the story behind Kothmale's success in radio browsing may hide the fact that the station is not truly in the hands of the community but is tightly controlled by the Sri Lankan government, via the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), which is in charge of its finances. Also, the lack of English-language proficiency among the community necessitates the use of local elites to interpret and put information into local contexts during radio browsing. This means that they effectively control access to all information that is not presented in local languages, thus cementing their status as community leaders and further widening the gap of access to information by poor laborers who are not of Sinhalese ethnicity. Moreover, no permanent mechanism exists for Kothmale community members to publish their information on the Internet in English in order to reach a wider audience.¹¹⁷

Community Radio and Mobile Phones

Mobile telephony represents probably the biggest revolution in radio broadcasting since the invention of the transistor. For community radio broadcasters mobile phones now mean they can communicate with their audiences more easily, elicit a greater quantity and quality of listener participation, create more and better outside broadcasts, send reports from remote places and thus get even closer to their community. As Girard has observed: "Mobile telephones are community radio's remote broadcasting units ... [they] cost less than \$100 and are so simple to use that community members with phones can become empowered correspondents, commentators and critics."¹¹⁸

For example, in West Africa, where the community radio scene is dominated by many small but impoverished stations, more than 40 percent of 108 community radios surveyed by Panos in 2008 said they used mobile phones regularly in their programming.¹¹⁹

Mobiles are also increasing the reach of radio, and changing the way people listen. For example, in Pakistan, 37 percent of young adult radio listeners surveyed in 2008 said they listen to radio via their phones.¹²⁰ Similarly in Colombia, where mobile telephony has spread at one of the fastest paces in Latin America, 42 percent of young adults (18-29 years old) surveyed in 2009 said they used their mobile phones to listen to the radio at least monthly, if not more frequently.¹²¹

An example from the earthquake in Haiti in January 2010 shows how radio and mobile phones can complement each other: SMS text alerts were used to direct injured survivors to functioning hospitals and to help search and rescue teams locate survivors; the number to call to access these text alerts were publicized on local radio. In addition to receiving critical news and information, Haitians could send, at no cost, text messages into the system. This ensured a stream of on-the-ground information useful to aid groups. The shortcode was publicized chiefly through local

radio stations, including Signal FM, Melody FM, MINUSTAH Radio FM, and Caraïbes FM. The latter broadcast from the sidewalk outside its quake-damaged building, sucking power from a car engine.¹²²

Mobile phones could also present a solution to the problem of fundraising through advertising. For a small rural community station, it used to be difficult to attract income from advertising beyond the small ads placed by community members. Now that cellphone technology penetrates into remote areas, it is possible to track the actual broadcast of an advertisement remotely by using sound tags identified and logged by a computer at the radio station, and then sent once a day via the Internet or via a cellphone connection to a central computer. The advertiser gets a unique access code and pays the radio station for each logged broadcast of the advertisement. The KBR68H radio network in Indonesia is already trying this system.¹²³

The rise of SMS for audience interactivity in rural radio creates other interesting opportunities, according to Determeyer, formerly of Free Voice. For example, a combination of educational broadcasts and SMS audience interactivity can generate a unique database about potential users of services such as vaccination campaigns, nutritional behavior, schooling, or the introduction of new seed varieties. For government agencies that keep statistics and organizations such as UNICEF and FAO, this data about potential clients is invaluable and makes reaching grassroots communities with targeted services easier and more efficient. Further, this means that networks of small media could potentially benefit from contracts with governments, development institutions, and commercial parties— even though they may be thousands of miles apart—thus gaining financially.¹²⁴

But, as with all technologies, using mobile phones present challenges. Firstly, there is the obvious problem of access—many of the poor and the marginalized, especially women, still do not have mobile phones. This is a problem acknowledged for instance, by Nakaseke Community Radio in Uganda, where tracking of calls to the station has shown it is the same few callers who always phone in—usually the better-off men.¹²⁵ Low literacy is also a factor limiting the use of SMS, and there are many languages—such as Arabic—in which texting is still not possible.

Although it is exciting to contemplate the potential of phones to mobilize democratic participation (such as voting, lobbying of authorities, convening of mass protests) and for dissemination of developmental information (such as market prices and agricultural and health advice) the reality is that more traditional methods of communication are still dominant. For instance, in a study among farmers in Ghana this year, it was found that radio and word of mouth are used far more than mobile phones as a source of information about farming business issues.

Financial factors are, unsurprisingly, the major barriers to the mass uptake of mobile phones as a tool for democratic debate: The great majority of phone calls made across the developing world are not calls to radio shows to voice opinions, but for more prosaic social, family, and business purposes.¹²⁶

The Future of Community Radio

The boom in community radio the world over has been due to increasingly liberalized media environments, access to more affordable and appropriate broadcasting technologies, and people-based movements that have fought over many years for changes in legislation and for community voices on the airwaves. International aid agencies are showing ever greater interest in community radio's ability to inform and empower.

The community radio boom is set to continue for some time to come. However, there are several threats to its sustainability.

First, the nature of broadcasting in the developing world is increasingly fractured. Commercial operators, public service broadcasters, state and community outlets all jockey for position in increasingly crowded markets. This is particularly true in the ever-expanding megacities of the developing world such as Jakarta, Lagos, or Sao Paulo where scores of FM stations pack the spectrum. This means that the most economically weak will be squeezed out of the market by commercial competitors. Because community radio tends to be weaker financially, this inevitably means a very difficult prospect for the community sector. Clearly television and the Internet have widened media choices and reduced the radio audience—although less so in Africa—consequently increasing the difficulty of finding backers for all kinds of radio, but especially community radio. Unless fair regulatory policies allocating a special place for community broadcasting are introduced and enforced, the unique voluntarism, energy, and voice of community radio will be drowned out by market forces.

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Meanwhile, community radio will become increasingly hybridized, such that it will become ever more difficult to differentiate a commercial broadcaster from a community one. Many commercial radios have recently adopted a social element in their broadcasts, expanding to reach rural areas, and attracting development funding for carrying agricultural, health, and other public interest programming that has traditionally been the preserve of community radios. What is more, they do this in a fresh, energetic, and professional way, using modern studios with strong and reliable transmitters. Zodiak FM in Malawi, Volta Star in Ghana, and Radio Citizen in Kenya are all cases in point. As aid agencies start to see that they can reach larger audiences through such hybrids, they may reduce their support for community radio, either as a means to reach audiences with behavior-change messages or, indeed, as an end in itself.

The second major threat to community radio is the increasing suspicion of minorities and special-interest groups in countries experiencing terrorist and other threats to national unity and security. As the “war on terror” continues to run its course, community radio stations in Muslim areas, especially, will inevitably get caught in the crossfire. Some may be appropriated by extremist groups, as has happened in Pakistan, and others may be unjustly accused of being so, as in Mali, Niger, and many other places. The threat of terrorism is unfortunately going to be used increasingly by authoritarian and fragile states to justify the limiting of free speech and consequently the suppression of community radio.

Third, digital media and the Internet pose a potential threat to community radio unless it finds ways to work and converge with it. New technology, “on-demand content,” and citizen media are all developing and becoming increasingly affordable, such that broadcasting on the FM band may soon be regarded as old fashioned, with Internet based radio stations and phone-based audio content taking the lead. Some observers point to how mobile phone operators can already circumvent government broadcast restrictions—for example in India—by creating and distributing news headlines and short bulletins as text messages to mobile phones for a small fee to users. Such possibilities now mean that community radio could turn new technology to its advantage. Citizen journalism via the Internet, and news and music via mobile phones and portable MP3 players are great opportunities. Community broadcasters could either embrace them as extensions of their existing offer, or they could be overtaken by them and suffer the consequences. But whichever technical options the community radio movement adopt will not matter if it does not retain and celebrate its strengths, which lie precisely in its “community-ness”—its very local, personal, and live feel. Though writing about community radio in the West, author and blogger Greg Guma’s advice applies the world over:

Small, impoverished, community radio stations that are not yet online need training and the technology to be so, while those that are already online need to find creative ways to turn the Internet to their advantage

“People already realise that their needs and interests aren’t being well served by distant corporate [media] entities with no real connection or concern for local needs. A strong focus on “local” news, music, events, people and issues - especially coupled with “global” access provides a winning combination.”¹²⁷

So small, impoverished, community radio stations that are not yet online need training and the technology to be so, while those that are already online need to find creative ways to turn the Internet to their advantage both from a content and a financial point of view.

Recommendations

- ▶ International donors should continue investing in community radio in support of freedom of expression and democratic participation.
- ▶ The international community should exert more pressure on repressive governments to enact pro-community radio legislation.
- ▶ In addition to making grants, donors should look at business models for sustaining community radio in the long term.
- ▶ Both donors and community radio stations should consider supporting or joining networks or associations of similar radio stations at the national level, to raise funds, to leverage advertising revenue, and to advocate. Such networks or associations can share programming, set standards and codes of ethics, identify and meet training needs, and approach advertisers and other donors with confidence.
- ▶ Governments should adopt mechanisms for state aid to the community radio sector that allow for impartial allocation of resources without direct government handouts. Where mechanisms are already in place, these should be expanded and improved.
- ▶ Governments should recognize the particularity of community radios in media legislation, should not categorize them with larger-scale commercial stations, should not oblige them to pay high taxes and license fees, and should reserve space for them when allocating frequencies on the radio spectrum.
- ▶ Community radio stations everywhere must look to the future and embrace new technology in creative ways.

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