

Delivering on the promise of community radio for development

We live in interesting times for community radio. Understanding and acknowledgement of its potential is both broader and deeper following a decade or more of advocacy in regions like Africa and Asia. And doors are opening: last October, Nigeria announced its plans to license community radio stations; Bangladesh should hear its first community radio broadcasts in the second quarter of 2011; and India started the year with more than one hundred licensed community radio stations.

Advocacy

Radio is dependent on national regulation and policy, which is one reason why so many countries still have limited access to local radio and why so much time needs to be spent on justifying community radio and articulating why it is important.

Advocacy concerning community radio generally extols the benefits of local broadcasting, the importance of citizen participation, reflection of local cultures, opportunities for marginalised groups, etc. The Kathmandu Declaration, formulated at AMARC8 in 2003, states “We consider that it is an established fact that community media, particularly community radio, have given communities the means of cultural expression, news and information, and local dialogue.”

Community radio and development

In India and Bangladesh, as elsewhere, advocacy has also been tied explicitly to community radio’s promise for development, in other words, its ability to contribute to better living conditions and quality of life, reduced poverty, improved health, etc. The Pastapur Initiative on Community Radio, a seminal advocacy tool crafted in 2000 by leading groups in the movement for community radio in India, encourages the government to “formulate progressive and innovative policy that fosters and encourages community radio so that the developmental objectives set forth in the Constitution could be fully realized”.

Community radio in this sense is clearly viewed as a vehicle for development communication, which from the mid-twentieth century has been an accepted strategy in addressing such development issues as poverty reduction, literacy, and basic education through the use of communication strategies, practices, and tools.

Community radio’s role in development needs to be seen in both intrinsic and instrumental terms, a useful distinction made by Steve Buckley, former president of AMARC, at a national consultation on community radio in India in December 2011. The intrinsic value

of the medium is the inherent benefit a community may derive from starting up and running a community radio. The use of radio can stimulate greater exchange of information and dialogue of ideas, reflecting local culture and knowledge. It creates opportunities for local expression and to engage in communication, which may in turn contribute to greater understanding, consensus, growth, etc. The intrinsic value of community radio reflects a participatory approach in which communication is two-way, open ended and process oriented. Communication itself – the act of sharing information and ideas and deliberation about them – becomes the very objective of development.

Challenges

This is not easy. While virtually all community radios face the challenge of sustainability, financial and otherwise, of far greater and more fundamental significance is the challenges of participation: engaging citizens, both on and off air, and achieving real representation in all aspects of a station’s decision making.

The instrumental significance of community radio is its potential as a tool for specific purposes associated with development, for example to raise awareness about natural disasters or to facilitate health education.

The risk here, all too evident in so much communication programming, is that content becomes instructive or prescriptive, with fixed, closed-ended messages, essentially one-way communication; generally experts telling people what to do. The process, if there is one, is often driven by external agencies that in turn are motivated by a need to see “results”. On the plus side, agencies are often willing to pay something for the use of the instrument. The challenge for community stations is to manage the process, balancing what ultimately may be contradictory or competing forces.

One important factor is that many community radios, in some environments the majority, are in fact often not very participatory at all, precisely because participatory communication is hard to do. Although a good deal of community radio advocacy is framed around its service to development, stations struggle to realise programming that empowers community groups to learn, act on what they learn, individually and collectively, and realise social transformation.

Community learning using radio

For the last three years, the Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental agency with a mandate to build capacities of groups to use media and technology to expand the scale, scope and quality of learning, has been investigating the potential of community radio as a vehicle for learning about health and related development issues.

What follows are four key success factors we’ve observed while working with development and communication groups in educational programming on community radio. The main lesson we have learnt is that you need to bring together the intrinsic with the instrumental, to make instrumental applications more participatory but not to lose sight of the importance of local communication channels to address health and other development problems in systematic ways.

Participation

In order for stations to succeed in supporting development, it is important that community stations have a solid understanding of participatory development communication, both principles and practices. Too much capacity building work is focused on technology and technical skills.

Participation needs to start with decision-making about the local priorities for learning programmes and continue through design, implementation and evaluation. Where COL has had success is in the design of learning programmes, specifically workshops that bring together key groups into a collaborative process focused on identifying messages and working them into a 3-12 month programme schedule while at the same time making decisions about programme formats.

Collaboration

Educational media programmes need the active involvement of different kinds of groups, each bringing different assets and playing different roles. Radio stations provide creative and communication expertise as well as broadcast facilities that can realise a large scale of learning. Experts, both individuals and groups, contribute legitimacy and technical knowledge, for example a district hospital in relation to a health programme. Community networks are essential in engaging with the real stakeholders, for example pregnant women and new mothers in the case of a maternal and child health programme. Finally, policymakers are essential in terms of either linking to official priorities or advocating for community priorities, as well as to public funds and other resources.

At the community or district level, it is rare that any one of these groups will have the knowledge, skills or resources to realise development communication programming. Collaborative approaches that bring groups together into win-win partnerships are a proven strategy; however it is extremely challenging.

Blended and multichannel learning

Educational media programmes are most successful when they map onto off-air networks. Face-to-face interactions, for

example in listening and discussion groups are important for various reasons: they permit learning content to be interpreted and contextualised, they allow for questions and discussion, particularly in terms of what actions to take and what obstacles are faced. Face-to-face interactions also enable feedback on the programme content and approach.

In the same vein, multichannel learning recognises that different technologies have different attributes and assets. Most promising in COL's work has been the combination of radio and mobile telephones. While telephones are valuable in conducting interviews and phone-in segments, they are also proving invaluable in supporting logistics and assessment. Reminders can be sent as text messages, listeners can register and signal their attendance; likewise SMS facilities can be used for simple quizzes that help producers to know who is listening and whether people are learning the basic messages.

Experience- and peer-based pedagogy

For a good deal of non-formal and informal learning, a dialogical approach is more effective than a didactic one. In other words people learn more effectively from the experience of their peers than they do from instruction by experts. In a practical sense, real experiences as related by diabetic or the family member of a diabetic, may have a greater impact than a doctor or nurse telling people what to do about diabetes. Ideally, programming integrates both expert information along with experiences that illustrate the benefits and consequences of particular practices and behaviours. ■

Ian Pringle
Education Specialist, Media
Commonwealth of Learning
www.col.org

Community radio and human rights in Labasa, Fiji

The Many Faces of Violence against Women

Femlinkpacific's 16 Days of Community Radio Campaign in Fiji continues to serve as a platform for local women to speak out on issues that are connected to the annual women's human rights campaign which brings global attention to the many faces of violence, including the silence that is perpetuated because of political, institutional and social structures: "Women need to claim their space in the decision-making areas in the community as most of the time women are told that their place is in the kitchen but we can do so much more" said Karolina, the President of the Dogoru Women's Group in the radio program. Women, she said, are too often told by their husbands not to speak out in the public or decision-making spaces, and often tradition is used as a tool to instil fear and silence: "Women do not participate

because their husbands tell them not to, and most of the time women are threatened to be quiet about domestic issues that happen in the families," Karolina added.

Vice President of the club, Asinate also highlighted the cultural barriers: "In our tradition and culture, women have to be quiet and keep the peace in the family and community. We are always told that their place is in the kitchen, but we women do most of the things in the house, we manage the house, the children, the food and clothing of the family, then I want to ask why we can't take part in decision-making for the family and community?"

Another club member Torika emphasized that such cultural practices included controlling what women and girls wore, how women should conduct themselves, and the restrictions placed on women which limits their participation in any form of dialogue or decision-making in the community:

"This issue of violence which comes in many different forms in a village or community makes women a victim in every way possible, not only at the domestic level but also at the structural levels of our society," she said.

All 3 women leaders who participated in the radio programs called on other women to take a stand and take collective action not just to make changes for women today - but for the young women and girls in their communities - The daily programme for the continuation of the 16 days community radio campaign in Vanua Levu includes live interviews with rural women from femLINKPACIFIC's Labasa "1325" network and features produced by members of Generation Next in Suva and Nadi.

More about Femlinkpacific: see the article on the SIGNIS website "20-minute bus ride to join other participants from Naleba, Vunicuicui, Bua and Dogoru." ■

Femlinkpacific



European Youth4Media Network e.V. is giving young people a voice through digital media. It is a European association of 36 organizations from 24 countries working in the field of community media and civil society. The member organizations form an active European network of communities, youth institutions as well as culture and media centres, being places for communication and civic engagement. Together, the youngsters of the European partner institutions organize cross-border networks of youth media work. They promote political and intercultural dialogue by means of audiovisual media. ■

Their handbook can be downloaded from www.youth4media.eu/?page_id=315