

Community broadcasting: a global overview

Steve Buckley, President, World Association for Community Radio Broadcasters
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Mr Chairman, colleagues and friends.

It is an honour and a privilege to be here in Dhaka for this Round Table on Community Radio, and particularly at such an exciting moment in the development of community radio in Bangladesh. I wish to start by thanking UNESCO and Katalyst for supporting this Round Table. I also wish to express appreciation to our local partners, BNNRC and MMC, for hosting this event and to congratulate them for their work, together with other civil society activists and supportive public officials who have brought about the Community Radio Policy for Bangladesh. It is ten years since I first met with community radio advocates from Bangladesh, at our seventh World Conference in Milan in 1998. Five years later at our Eight World Conference in Kathmandu, a great delegation came from Bangladesh traveling by minibus overland from Dhaka. It was clear then that momentum was building for community radio to make a breakthrough.

We in AMARC, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, also have cause for celebration this year, since it is the anniversary of our founding. Twenty-five years ago, in 1983, a group of Canadian community radio activists had the optimism to believe that beyond their borders not only were there others engaged in the practice of community broadcasting, but that there was, perhaps, out there, an embryonic international movement waiting to be born. This founding group had the audacity to title their small gathering a World Assembly of Community Radio Broadcasters. Or rather, as this was Quebec, *L'assemble mondiale des artisans des radio communautaires*, or AMARC, for short.

Community radio broadcasters are indeed artisans or craftspeople, creating images with sounds, not designing media to a formula driven by marketing calculation or propagandistic intent, but drawing on a passion for the medium and a belief that community broadcasting can make a difference to people's lives and livelihoods.

When AMARC first began in the early 1980s it was informed by the experience of community radio in North America, Europe and Australia. But this was not a phenomenon of developed countries alone. We drew inspiration too from the rich history of community broadcasting in Latin America, that dates back to the Bolivian miner's radios of the late 1940s, and today has a presence in almost every Latin American country – not only worker's radios like those of the Bolivian miners, but educational radios, indigenous people's radios, women's radios, radios in almost every major urban centre and in some of the remotest rural communities. Over the years, the Latin American experience has profoundly influenced the growth of the international community radio movement particularly as we have come to better understand the role of media in development.

Beyond Latin America, there was almost no experience of community radio in the developing world. It was not until 1991, that the first community radio initiative in Asia, the Tambuli project in the Philippines, got off the ground. It was the same year, in Africa, that the Malian revolution led to the opening up of the airwaves, previously a state monopoly throughout Africa. Mali was quickly followed in 1992 by community radio in Benin also after a democratic revolution, and then by South Africa. In South Africa, the first community radio stations in 1983 were illegal but licensing

commenced in 1994 under the transitional government, and has flourished in the post apartheid era. The growth of community radio in Africa, from the mid 1990s onwards, and more recently in Asia, has brought a much greater focus on and awareness of the role that community radio can play in voice and empowerment.

In almost all cases we find a close correlation between the emergence of community radio and political change towards greater democracy. Not only in Africa, but in Asia, we find similar patterns. Community radio started in Nepal in 1997, following the first democratic revolution. It played a central role in the defence of democracy and human rights in 2005 and since the second democratic revolution in Nepal of May 2006, there has been rapid growth. Similarly in Indonesia community broadcasting emerged after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 2000.

Recent years have also seen mainstream recognition of community radio in the discourse of human rights and of development. Economists like Amartya Sen, Joseph Stiglitz and Jeffrey Sachs have all highlighted the importance to effective and sustainable development of having a free, independent and pluralistic media environment that can not only provide access to knowledge and information but can contribute to transparency, good governance and the rooting out of corruption. Community broadcasting, in this broader context, is now seen by many development experts as a vital tool to empower the poorest people and communities.

People and groups who face social and economic marginalisation, especially those in rural areas, are often poorly served or not served at all by private commercial media, and they lack easy access to finance capital to establish their own services. Community broadcasting provides an alternative social and economic model for media development that can broaden access to information, voice and opinion.

Human rights and development experts have noted that people faced with social and economic exclusion also face systemic obstacles to freedom of expression that are associated with the conditions of poverty – low levels of education and literacy, poor infrastructure, lack of access to electricity and general communications services, discrimination and so on. Community media have become a vital means by which the voiceless are able to exercise their right to freedom of expression and access to information.

The Ninth United Nations Round Table on Communications for Development, in its final declaration in 2004, referred to community media in the following terms:

“Governments should implement a legal and supportive framework favouring the right to free expression and the emergence of free and pluralistic information systems, including the recognition of the specific and crucial role of community media in providing access to communication for isolated and marginalised groups.”¹

Despite such international recognition there remain serious obstacles to establishment of community media in many countries. In some countries community broadcast services exist in substantial numbers but being not legally recognized have a precarious existence and frequently face persecution. In other countries they have been prevented from establishing by strictly enforced licensing systems that exclude this form of broadcasting. These difficulties are often associated with governments that seek to control the flow of information but they have also been reinforced in environments

¹ Ninth United Nations Round Table on Communications for Development, Rome, September 2004

where private media are strong by the interests of private media groups in excluding potential competition for audience.

Overall the recent trends for community broadcasting have been positive. There are over 100 countries with some form of community broadcasting rather more than there are countries with national public service broadcasters. Nevertheless there remain many countries where community broadcasting is either not permitted or is reluctantly tolerated but not encouraged. There have been a number of studies, most recently including work by AMARC's Latin America and Caribbean regional section, that have examined, in detail, the country level legal and regulatory environments that have given the best results in enabling community broadcasting to establish and to flourish. Countries that can be mentioned as good examples include Benin, South Africa, Australia, Colombia, France and the Netherlands, among others. In these studies are outlined some characteristics of good practice which may be summarised in the following key points:

1. Community broadcasting should be recognized in policy and law as having distinct characteristics and be guaranteed fair and equitable access to the radio frequency spectrum and other broadcast distribution platforms, including digital platforms.
2. Procedures for the award and regulation of broadcast licensing and frequencies for community broadcasting should be fair, open and transparent, and under the administrative responsibility of an independent regulatory body.
3. Community broadcasters should have access to a diversity of funding sources without unreasonable restrictions. This may include public funds administered in such a way that this does not compromise their independence.

But policies, laws and regulation are not sufficient on their own. Political will is also required to implement legal and regulatory provisions in a manner designed to encourage and not restrict the growth and development of community broadcasting.

There are many challenges ahead for community broadcasting – the rush to marketisation of the airwaves, the privatisation of spectrum, the growth of powerful media concentrations that deter politicians from acting in the public interest on media reform, the emergence of new digital broadcasting technologies with the uncertainties that this brings. But the substantial worldwide growth of community broadcasting over the last 25 years is an indicator that this sector has a crucial and specific contribution to make to a plural media landscape and that it meets needs which are not well catered for by other media. The vital role of community broadcasting is also witnessed in the courage of community radio activists who continue to operate in sometimes very dangerous conditions – in situations of conflict, or in fragile or lawless states where parallel powers show little respect for human rights – risking physical violence and intimidation and sometimes death as in recent times in Philippines and Mexico.

The adoption by progressive minded governments of policies, laws and regulations that enable or regularise this sector, as has happened in Bangladesh, is an important step taken in modern processes of media reform and is evidence of a commitment to a participatory and democratic culture. In the period ahead we look forward to the early implementation of the commitments. We are ready to work with you and our local partner organisations, in any way we can, to support and assure the successful establishment of community radio in Bangladesh.

Thank you.