



## **Voices for Change and Peace: Taking Stock of Community Radio in South Asia**

Seminar organized by  
**AMARC Asia Pacific and UNESCO Chair on Community Media, University of Hyderabad**

in collaboration with  
**UNESCO, International Media Support, Community Radio Forum of India and Indian Academy for Self Employed Women**

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### **VOICES FOR CHANGE AND PEACE Recommendations for a more Democratic Environment for Community Radio in South Asia**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

On January 17 and 18, 2013, about 60 community radio advocates, radio broadcasters, media academics, civil society groups, journalists, social activists and government representatives from South Asia (India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bhutan) gathered in New Delhi to articulate and review media mechanisms to promote a just and humane world through communications and specifically through community radio (CR). The deliberations were organized by AMARC Asia Pacific and the UNESCO Chair on Community Media (University of Hyderabad) in collaboration with UNESCO, International Media Support, Community Radio Forum of India and the Indian Academy of Self Employed Women.

The Group noted that the Community Radio (CR) scene in South Asia is as diverse as the region. India, which is home to about 145 community radio stations today, the majority of which are run by educational institutions, is grappling with a community radio policy that is almost a decade old. Despite having the oldest community radio policy in the South Asian region, the growth of the sector in India has been sluggish. Bureaucratic procedures, the formidable setting-up costs, and the demands of building people's capacities for broadcasting, among other things, have been thwarting the growth of community radio in the country. Nepal, on the other hand, presents a contrasting picture, with a thriving community radio sector that started much earlier than India, but remains to formalize a community radio policy. Recent attempts in Sri Lanka to promote independent community radio broadcasting may finally take it beyond state-managed community radio projects such as the Kothmale Radio. Bangladesh, with a few stations on air, has been treading a cautious path, seeing community radio primarily as a medium to address issues of development and disaster management. There have been active conversations in other South Asian countries like Maldives, Bhutan, Pakistan and Afghanistan about the exciting possibilities that CR can bring into their respective national mediascapes.



The Group articulated several concerns that make the emergence and sustenance of a third-tier of community broadcasting (apart from public and commercial sectors) in the South Asian region a challenging task. Problems such as restrictive policy frameworks, inadequate allocation of spectrum for communities, and the lack of a sustainable support system are among the issues that need to be addressed urgently for genuine democratization of media spaces in South Asia. Apprehensions over security arising out of the activities of a variety of non-state actors in South Asia have also contributed to a somewhat hesitant opening up of airwaves in certain areas.

Urging the need for an enabling and equitable environment for community radio in the region, the group recommended the evolution and implementation of policy frameworks in the region which are in keeping with international standards of media broadcasting. Towards this end it appreciated and reiterated the principles enshrined in the Joint Declaration on Diversity in Broadcasting that was adopted on December 12, 2007 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the ACHPR (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information.

The two-day seminar took stock of South Asian experiences with community radio, including the strong potential of the medium for social change and promotion of peace in the region. After intense deliberations, the group formalized four critical areas for reform. These included policy, sustainability, technology, and knowledge & capacity-sharing. The detailed recommendations are presented below:

## **CR POLICY**

**Spectrum Allocation for Community Radio (CR):** The Government should prepare a comprehensive and transparent Spectrum Allocation Plan, if necessary by geographical zones, and reserve spectrum for CR both in rural and urban areas. In such a plan, priority must be accorded to establishing community based radio stations. Also, Spectrum allocation process must be taken up in consultation with all stakeholders. 30% of spectrum – across frequency bands – should be reserved for community broadcasting. Transmission up to 5 watts ERP (effective radiated power) should be de-licensed for community broadcasting.

**Campus and Community Operated Radio Stations:** There is no doubt that in a country's overall broadcast environment, there is scope and a valid place for Campus Radio Stations and the radio stations run by SAUs (State Agriculture Universities) and KVKs, (Krishi Vigyan Kendras/Agriculture Research Centres). However, priority must be accorded to community-based organizations rather than these institutions in sanctioning of licences. Also such stations must adopt the core principles of CR, such as local participation in content generation and a management structure that is inclusive and accountable to the larger community. It would be ideal if we could define a distinct sub-sector of Campus-based radio and with its own guidelines.

**Government-run CR stations:** Under no circumstances, government institutions, such as Rural Development and Panchayat Raj entities be allowed to start CR stations, directly or by proxy. Government run radios under any name, form and guise cannot be considered to be



community radios, because CR stations have a distinct and universally accepted set of characteristics and standards that cannot be fulfilled by government-run radio.

**Streamlining of Licensing Processes:** The application processes and procedures to obtain CR licenses must be simplified and decentralised. There should be single-window clearance and a stipulated period within which licenses are issued. There should be transparent procedures for tracking the status of applications and separate CR Cells must be set up at all relevant ministries for better coordination.

**CR Stations for Deprived Regions:** Licensing of CR stations in relatively deprived areas should be given priority on the basis of their critical need for social change and peace-building, and not rejected on the grounds of extremism or terrorism in these areas. Community Radio as a medium of horizontal communication to articulate local developmental needs and cultural identities as well as a tool for conflict resolution is most required in these regions.

**Freedom to Broadcast News:** Where it exists, the prohibition on broadcasting of news and current affairs on CR stations must be lifted immediately. CR policy in any South Asian country must acknowledge that freedom of expression is a fundamental right to ensure other freedoms established in international human rights instruments.

**Nominal Spectrum Fee:** International experiences confirm a trend indicating a reduction in spectrum fees to enable growth of this not-for-profit sector. Many countries do not levy a spectrum fee. We recommend that either spectrum for CR should be made available for free or the fee amount must be nominal. Community audits must be made the basis for renewal of licenses and automatic renewal must be discouraged.

**Independent Regulator for Broadcasting in general and Community Radio in particular:** It is recommended that the long-standing need for an independent broadcasting regulatory authority must be revisited and implemented. Meanwhile, a mechanism for self-regulation of the CR sector that promotes community radio from a right to communication perspective and enables self-sustainability is the desirable option.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

**Setting up of Regional and National CR Funds:** A South Asia wide regional corpus fund (possibly linked to the SAARC process) should be set up to promote the sector in the region. In addition, individual countries in the region should set up National Funds to support CR stations. Such a national fund should have the following features:

- The Fund should be set up as an independent and autonomous body. It should provide a strategic cross-subsidy funding mechanism for community broadcasting. While primary sources of funding would emanate from the various Ministries of the Government, additional resource mobilization would also be accessed by the fund from donor agencies, multilateral organizations, corporate social responsibility/private sector sources and others.



- The CR Fund structure and decision making should demonstrate independence, transparency, and accountability in its efforts to facilitate an enabling environment for the community radio sector in the country. This should be reflected in the composition of its board members, grants evaluation panel and other advisory committees. Representatives on these groups should comprise a mix of community radio actors and eminent people with proven credentials in areas like governance, media, fund raising, and the law.

**Sponsorship and Advertising:** Sponsored programmes should not be restricted to Government sponsorship, but also include support from development agencies and other organizations that are committed to broadcast public interest information. The government should expedite empanelment of all CR Stations for receiving government advertising. As far as possible, CR stations must encourage advertisements for local products and services. CR stations should refrain from accepting advertising from political parties and other such entities that may compromise their independence.

**Capacity Building Processes:** A training cascade where more and more community members are trained by the initial pool of trainees goes a long way in ensuring sustained programming. Training programmes addressing programme sustainability should be an integral part of the community radio station's strategy and developed at the inception stage prior to license application. Capacity building for technology sustainability should be part of the capacity building process.

**Regular/Annual community audits:** Community audits should be held where the community assesses the credibility of the station in terms of community content, participation and impact. These could be in the form of public hearings.

**New Media Interface/Content-Sharing Platforms:** Interface between community radio and new media, including online web-based platforms, should be encouraged and strengthened so as to increase the relevance and value of community broadcasting. CR Stations should explore the viability of web-based exchange portals that promote content-sharing.

## **TECHNOLOGY**

**Promotion of affordable technologies:** Greater access to broadcast technologies and demystification of the techniques of production should be among the primary objectives of both the Government and Civil Society. The CR Policy as well as the sector as a whole must enable the promotion and adoption of affordable and user-friendly technologies. Low-cost and appropriate technology options must be encouraged for setting up community radio stations. In addition, more agencies should be allowed to manufacture transmitters. This is bound to decrease the costs on transmitters. Community broadcasting should not be limited to any one band in the spectrum or any one technology platform.

**Higher Power Transmitters for Geographically-Dispersed Regions:** The relevant government ministries should make provision for transmitters of higher power in difficult terrains. It could also consider provision of repeaters in extreme conditions.



**Support Mobile Telephony:** CBOs should explore the option of integrating mobile telephony into their radio stations to provide for increased interaction and effectiveness in terms of programming.

**Create Maintenance Networks:** There is also an urgent need to initiate a network for maintenance and upgradation of technology and for skill-building in this area. Through such a network, CR stations can share notes on simple fixes, evaluate equipment for durability and performance and even share repair-capable human resources.

**Grant for R&D:** Government and donor agencies should explore the setting up of a grant for Research and Development on cost-effective technologies. Similarly, there is also need for a grant for capacity-sharing, particularly in terms of technology inputs, maintenance, servicing and repairs of CR equipment.

**Community broadcasting sector technology reforms:** While digitization may be inevitable, the switchover deadline should be set realistically, with affordability of digital receivers by marginalized communities being the main consideration. Further, community radio stations should have the option to simulcast (in analogue and digital) till the communities actually possess digital receivers notwithstanding digital switchover deadlines set by government agencies. It is also recommended that digital switchover be accompanied by exemption of import duty for digital transmitters and receivers, open standards in digital transmission and reception hardware, and seven year tax holiday for Indian digital radio manufacturers.

## **KNOWLEDGE-AND-CAPACITY SHARING**

**Peer-to-Peer Capacity-Sharing Workshops:** Community Radio practitioners at the grassroots level should be recognized and encouraged as capable trainers. Peer-to-peer capacity-sharing workshops need to be subsidized by government support, so that practitioners are further equipped as trainers. Peer-to-peer sharing at local, regional, national and international levels should be promoted for community radio practitioners. To achieve this, field visits amongst community radio practitioners must be subsidized through government support.

**Engagement of women in CR:** The CR community in South Asia must take note of the gender disparities in the region and address them pro-actively. CR must encourage participation of women in programme production and decision-making positions by consciously adopting a progressive gender policy at the sector as well as station levels. CR must promote women's empowerment through cross learning and provide special access to training programmes for women broadcasters.

**Knowledge-Sharing in Regional Languages:** Knowledge- and-capacity sharing should be encouraged and promoted not only in English but also in regional languages so that community members at the grassroots can actively contribute and participate in the process.

**Participatory Models for M&E:** Community-based self-assessment models for monitoring and evaluation of community radio in local contexts need to be developed, collated,



documented and shared amongst practitioners through various mechanisms such as workshops, conferences, consultations and seminars. Where necessary, external support should be provided to build capacities for self-evaluation.

**Holistic Approach to Capacity Building:** Emphasis should be given to policy literacy, knowledge of legal provisions, research and documentation, so that communities can fully realize ownership and management of their CR stations. Knowledge-and-capacity sharing in terms of social sustainability holds the key to the future of community radio. Further, tools such as public, community-based social audits should be included in capacity-building programmes.

**Technology Related Capacity Building:** This needs to empower community members to make technological choices which are locally relevant and sustainable. Ideally, communities should be able to make these choices before operationalizing their community radio stations.

**Training Consortia:** Training consortia must be developed and also mutually agreed training material, including that on policies, labour laws, sexual harassment in the work place etc. should be made available online. Training for women CR producers must be promoted and conducted within the paradigm of gender justice and rights. Where such a need is felt, this consortia could explore the possibility of accreditation and certification to grassroots radio producers who successfully complete this training.

**The Group reiterated and reaffirmed its resolve to work towards the realization of these recommendations. The signatories also recognize that some of these recommendations will be achieved through their own actions, while for others, they will collectively advocate for necessary changes. These are crucial to promote and protect people's communication rights and all rights embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.**

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