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PAPER TOPIC:
Sustaining Community Radio Initiatives in India:
Challenges at the Grassroots

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ABSTRACT

The debate and deliberations on community broadcasting in India has discovered new found attention with the recent Government decision to permit Community Radio Institutions at the community level. With the recent cabinet decision to allow CR beyond campus life, the focus has picked up pace. The new found expectation is, a great revolution is going to be unleashed countrywide by the use and spread of strings of community radio. With this a new technological revolution is certainly on the anvil. Governance and service delivery shall have a new meaning now. Information and communication revolution can be unleashed in a big way now onward especially in underdeveloped regions.

Even before the cabinet approval individuals, groups, CSOs, NGOs, and others have been involved in running such Community radio operations albeit without breaking the law. The instances of Namma Dhwani, SEWA Radio, Helwel Vani and others have demonstrated that despite legal limitations efforts are being made continuously to see the merits of CR in India in the real sense. The list of Community Radio projects and audio initiatives is growing.

The advantages from CR initiatives are there to count for. Community broadcasting provides news, information, cultural content and entertainment to communities defined by geographical location or common interest. Thus the importance of community radio in India for community development cannot be exaggerated in any sense. Community radio is an essential component in a country like India where more than half of the population is still living in rural conditions.

Challenges are no less intimidating. The present use of this medium is limited and its full use is hindered by regulations and control of the government. The larger question is sustaining such grassroots institutions which involve so many issues. There is the Importance of community leadership to highlight the cases of CR and rural empowerment and so on. That technology should be a part of society and not the vice versa is an important fact. The benefits of having CR facilities should outdo the disadvantages. Community radio serving the dissemination and exchange of relevant information — educational and developmental is no less a challenge. It must lead to capacity building, personality development and skill upgradation. It must serve as a reliable and continuous source of information and knowledge sharing. It must lead to boosting of rural and community economic life. CR initiatives should reflect good governance through timely awareness drive on issues related to gram panchayats, local election process, public discussion, and so on. It must address the diverse needs of groups and communities at the community level.

I. Introduction

The worth and multidimensional advantages[1] of having community radio set ups at the community level have been well demonstrated through various experimentations time and again. National governments have risen to this reality in a phased manner. Equally, the role of local, regional, national and international agencies, including civil society bodies, has been exceedingly critical in substantiating this worth. Through community broadcasting worthwhile attempts being made to bridge information and communication gaps[2], provide social, economic and cultural inputs, enabling awareness generations among far placed villages and people. The challenges[3] in all these interventions are no less stupendous.

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[1] Beyond doubt there are social, cultural, economic and political advantages in having a CR institution provided it is managed within a definite framework with experienced heads and hands.

[2] CR institutions are supposed to fill in the voids or gaps in information and community due to passive role of mainstream media.

[3] Most of these challenges are local and bottom up hurdles due to social, cultural and economic constraints.

In India community broadcasting is yet to take a full fledged shape. The positive development is the recent Government green signal to set up such platforms at the community level. Prior to this, community radio was restricted within academic institutions with limited frequency reach.

While the country is all set to engage on the radar of community broadcasting yet there persist both top down and bottom up challenges in days to come. The policy framework, guidelines and other official paraphernalia will take much revamping and expedition in enabling a smooth official climate to set up such ground breaking ventures. Equally there shall arise critical challenges at the grassroots in such interventions like physical environment, community support, social and cultural challenges and so on. The prime concern shall be sustaining such CR institutions in the long term.

The focus of this paper is to highlight the grassroots challenges and limitations in sustaining such institutions and attempt to bring out possible remedies for the same. The focus is on the critical factors of sustaining such CR institutions as agents of community transformation.

II. Background

It almost took a decade for the Government to allow community radio institutions at the community level. However, even before the cabinet approval in November 2006, individuals, groups, CSOs, NGOs, have been involved in running Community radio institutions within the legal ambit. The instances of Namma Dhwani, SEWA Radio, Helwel Vani and the list include many more. The Pastapur initiative of the Deccan Development Society of Andhra Pradesh is one that uses the rich oral tradition of the community, and is managed entirely by Dalit women.

The Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan is an initiative in Bhuj in Gujarat using the medium-wave broadcast channel of AIR. Alternative for India Develpoment, Bihar, which has a radio initiative in Daltonganj, in the Palamau District of Jharkhand, uses purchased air-time from a local AIR channel. Namma Dhwani, the VOICES initiative in Budikote, Karnataka, cablecasts programmes, made by the community members themselves, right into their homes. Some of the most recent initiatives includes Charkha's Pechuwali Man Ker Swar in Ranchi, SEWA's 'Rudi no Radio' in Gujarat and Agragamee's 'Ujjala' in Jeypore, Orissa. Institutions like One World South Asia, The Population Foundation of India are also involved in several CR networks in India in

states like Orissa, Bihar and Rajasthan. It is well expected that development on CR henceforth shall witness increased traffic in CR initiatives.

III. The worth of having CR Institutions

The advantages from CR initiatives are there to count for. Community broadcasting provides news, information, cultural content and entertainment to communities defined by geographical location or common interest. The diversity of program content available through community broadcasting, particularly specialist Ethnic, Indigenous, Radio for the Print Handicapped (RPH) services, broadens the media choices available to listeners and customers.

Community radio has gained such a high level of popularity because the ethos of community radio is independence and responsibility to serve the community, not the advertiser. The other reasons lie in the fact that community radio programming is designed by the community, to improve social conditions and the quality of its cultural life. The community itself can decide what are its priorities and needs in terms of information provision[4]. For instance, the **'Kishor Vani'** on Air aims at creating a model of adolescent community radio as a tool to express their aspirations, concerns, apprehensions and doubts on issues like adolescent health, especially reproductive health and issues like HIV/AIDS. The **Namma Dhwani** initiative disseminates audio and video content on a daily basis giving critical local information to marginalized communities on health, agriculture, governance, education, employment, community building, identity, culture etc. The **Radio Alakal** is a Community radio for fisher folk in Kerala**.** Apart from weather forecast, tidal height, conditions at sea and disaster warning, the programme content includes discussions and expert opinions on livelihood options, market information and interviews. In Uttarakhand, **Pradeep Community Radio, Raibar Community Radio and Hewal vani Community Radio** are some of the groups working actively in the region. These community radio programs are providing news on issues that are directly related to employment, education, etc. These CR programs are helping information to travel from one village to another in the hills. **Raghav Radio** was the Community Radio run by one Raghav Mahto from Village Mansoorpur in Vaishali District in Bihar until it was shut down in early 2006 after it ran for over two years, albeit overtly and covertly. In the last three years, if the content of Raghav Fm can be defined, it would be: Entertainment, Health, Education, Announcements & Instant

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[4] http://www.i4donline.net/aug04/reaching.asp

News, Disaster, Deals & Voluntary Advertisements, Agriculture, and Community Information Services. C**hala Ho Gaon Mein (**'Come, let us go to village') is the first Community Radio Program in Jharkhand launched on August 5th, 2001. The program has since continued and is expanding its influence in the most remote, backward and inaccessible regions of Jharkhand like Palamau and Garwah. Palamou that was in news for drought, backwardness and recently for the naxalite activities witnessed a unique and innovative use of radio as an important tool for empowerment[5].

Given the high percentage of illiteracy among women, radio offers one of the most powerful ways to reach and educate women. Instances can be cited here from Radio Solh (peace) in Afghanistan. The Solh broadcasts[6] in a radius of about 70 km, with three hours of morning and three hours of afternoon programming consisting of news, humanitarian information and educational content with an emphasis on women's issues.

There is increasing evidence for CR social impact in poverty reduction, in addressing development objectives and in democracy building. A key aspect of the communication process initiated by CR is giving and amplifying the voices of the poor and the marginalized, particularly women[7]. Furthermore, the positive link between information and communication technologies and community Radio needs to be further implemented in order to increase the effectiveness of CR interventions[8]. Further more, looking at India's backward regions with low literacy rates of men and women, knowing that only a quarter of the population speaks the only common language, taking into consideration the vastness of the country and its many distinctly different languages and cultures – along with the oral communication being both traditional, familiar and effective, community radio is a very appropriate response to the development issues at stake[9].

Thus the importance of community radio in India for community development cannot be exaggerated. Community radio is an essential component in a country like India where more than half of the population is still living in rural conditions. Such a medium can really help in community development on a macro basis. The need is for building partnerships and networking to build up pressure from the civil society groups so that government of the day can hear such voices from the ground.

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[5] http://www.i4donline.net/aug04/community_radio.asp

[6] Radio Solh (Peace) - a community radio initiative in Jabulsaraj in the central Afghan province of Parvan

[7] http://amarcwiki.amarc.org/safe/pdf/crsia_part_v.pdf

[8] http://amarcwiki.amarc.org/safe/pdf/crsia_part_v.pdf

[9] http://www.mediamoz.com/CR/CR_sustainable.htm

IV. **Challenges are for Real**

In preparation of turning plans into reality, creating these powerful - yet fragile - institutions, the need is to carry out a number of studies to assess sustainability potentials and obstacles. These micro studies shall provide with details of what one can expect and somehow already knew: that when moving outside of the urban centres, experience with the creation of CR organisational structures, let alone effectively managing these, can be very weak, when not totally absent. The need is therefore to design a process, doing the utmost to establish effective mechanisms to create a sound foundation for success, basing such interventions as much as possible on local capacity and local organising experience available[10]. The pace of policy and regulatory approvals is still being hindered by regulations and control of the government. The lack of proper enabling legislation is the single principle barrier to the further development of community radio[11]. Community broadcasting still needs to be universally recognized as a distinct media sector, as a vital alternative to state owned public broadcasters and commercial private media[12].

Challenges on Ground

The challenge is in having a right kind of approach to initiate and run such community institutions. A technocratic and top-down approach shall fail to deliver the real fruits. That technology should be a part of society and not the vice versa is an important fact. That technology should enable society to take up corrective and needful steps is a well experimented issue. Any technology including community radio apparatus should be able to address social issues and not aggravate it.

The benefits of having CR facilities should outdo the disadvantages. Community radio serving the dissemination and exchange of relevant information — educational and developmental is no less a challenge. It must lead to capacity building, personality development and skill upgradation. It must serve as a reliable and continuous source of information and knowledge sharing. It must lead to boosting of rural and community economic life. CR initiatives should reflect good governance through timely awareness drive on issues related to gram panchayats, local election process, public discussion, and so on.

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[10] http://www.mediamoz.com/CR/CR_sustainable.htm

[11] http://amarcwiki.amarc.org/safe/pdf/crsia_part_v.pdf

[12] http://amarcwiki.amarc.org/safe/pdf/crsia_part_v.pdf

Whether CR can fill the empty space left out by traditional and modern media band wagons is another issue at hand. Whether government programs and policies will have more chances of success; Corruption and malpractices can be restricted are other challenges including addressing public grievances. There is the Importance of community leadership to highlight the cases of CR and rural empowerment and so on.

Sustaining Community Radio initiatives in India poses a serious economic opportunity and challenges henceforth. What shall be financial modus operandi of sustaining such CR institutions? Serious funding shortages can dilute the independence of community radio stations in the country trying to promote freedom of expression and providing a voice to rural Indians.

Whether radio stations can ever be financially sustainable remains an open question in India's fledgling community broadcast sector. The vast majority of these stations shall be quite new and shall face vast challenges linked to reconstruction, economic uncertainty, poverty and the like[13]. Although community support shall be strong for stations, enthusiastic volunteers may not be enough to keep its hours of daily programming on the air. The stations must be finding it difficult to keep good staff as community support only stretches as far as operating costs. The need shall be of training as well as funding.

Establishing CR institutions is poised to face another challenge. The task may not be easy, given Indian traditions and the power of local traditional forces over modern ones[14]. As such community mobilization is a must in such situations.

At the same time, when looking around at the local/community radio stations already established in India and neighbouring countries like Nepal and Afghanistan one can see ample evidence of the challenges and obstacles identified: stations being off the air for long periods of time due to lack of proper technical configurations (like lack of provision to protect against the general fluctuations and sudden surges in the electricity supply as well as lack of earthing protection mechanism against the effects of the frequent and powerful lightening 'attacks') and lack of effective financial and/or technical backup systems in place. This, combined with inadequately trained staff and usually a very fragile community-base for the radios, rendered such local radio stations extremely vulnerable[15].

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[13] http://www.cbonline.org.au/index.cfm?pageId=12,102,3,537

[14]

[15] http://www.mediamoz.com/CR/CR_sustainable.htm

V. Sustaining CR Institutions

Although sustainability is often discussed in largely financial terms – the ability to generate revenues that will maintain a project- it has been found that sustainability involves several interconnected dimensions[16]. Community radio sustainability is a global challenge and in spite of the increasing positive experience of socially sustainable community radio; financial and technological sustainability remains challenges for community radio organizers[17]. Knowledge sharing and capacity building are central for CR sustainability.

Certain decisive factors can be identified to minimise CR institution vulnerability and thus to ensure the sustainable functioning of the CR stations that is already in the set up process:

1. **Community ownership & participation is must:** A strong community ownership should be at the core of the CR set ups. when the community feels that this is their station to which it provides producers and stories, where it assists in overcoming financial problems, and where it prevents theft by all being alert and protective, only then would a station in rural ambience have a chance of survival[18]. According to Bertolt Brect (1930), "Radio could be wonderful public communication system, imagine a gigantic system of channels – could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting, but also of receiving, enabling the listener not just to hear but also to speak, not isolating but connecting them." This no doubt calls for community participation per se.

Creating this community ownership and making CR a public communication system takes time. The need is for a short and medium term mobilisation and capacitation phase before arrival of the magic equipment, which would absorb all interest once in place. The civil society bodies needs to take note of this awareness drive. Based on the assessments, and the initial realisation that the inception method of the stations already on, pilot stations shall provide the all the more necessary inputs of community orientations in such CR institutions. Here, the need for social mobilisation process, carefully identifying in each community the many sub-communities within, ensuring information to, dialogue with and mobilisation of all of these is critical.

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[16] Slater, Don, Jo Tacchi, 2004, *ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction*, UNESCO, New Delhi
[17] http://amarcwiki.amarc.org/safe/pdf/crsia_part_v.pdf
[18] http://www.mediamoz.com/CR/CR_sustainable.htm

There are instances wherein it has been hard to make people understand the importance of liberalization of the community radio at the policy level. There are gaps between ground realities and the need for capacity enhancement of communities for which the policy is designed.

One can think here of the "Process Coach Scheme": a person is employed to work in the community every second weekend[19]. This coach is responsible for the mobilisation process within the community, for assisting and facilitating the organising work of first the installation committee and afterwards the management committee, and finally for organising training processes for the many volunteer community members in order to prepare them to function effectively within and around the community radio[20]. The Process Coach Scheme has proven to be extremely adequate and effective in Mozambique, creating not only a basic nucleus of between 20 and 70 knowledgeable, trained, committed and highly motivated community members around the station, but also having ensured that much wider parts of the many communities within the community are informed about the processes and plans, thus ensuring their feeling of belonging to the process.

2. **Training & Capacitation:** Furthermore effective training and capacitation would need to be organised, facilitating that the farmers, the school teachers, the accountants, school children, mothers– in brief: the community, could run the station effectively in terms of management and community relations, programming, administration and technical maintenance[21].

In order to create their own radio station, communities have to start from scratch in practically all areas that form crucial parts of the capacity to run a sustainable and effective community radio station: community radio management, organisational development, staff and volunteer management, administration and financial management including donor relations and fundraising, programming and programme format production including audience research and continued audience relations, not to mention technical operation and (preventive) management skills[22].

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[19] This scheme is implemented in Mozambique
[20] http://www.mediamoz.com/CR/CR_sustainable.htm
[21] http://www.mediamoz.com/CR/CR_sustainable.htm
[22] http://www.mediamoz.com/CR/CR_sustainable.htm

In all communities there are people who possess some of these skills, at times due to training and education, yet in most cases due to amply proven real life experience in making life work – too often under extremely adverse conditions. The challenge is to identify these people, ensure that they become involved in some way in the organisation in or around the radio, and to create a number of adequate ways to further strengthen this capacity and the many others that are needed.

Based on needs assessment, a capacitation strategy must be formulated consisting of components: (i) A series of intensive training courses, (ii) A community training programme through expert leads, (iii) Exposure to CR realities, including study trips to other community, commercial and public radio stations, (iv) CR Management Seminars and Workshops, and finally (v) Establishment of a CR 'Training Station', which can train and guide up-starting radio stations and help these get going at a basic, yet sound basis and pace.

3. **Sufficient Technical planning & a technical sustainability system:** the need is for adequate pre-ongoing technical planning in order to have a sustainable technical system. Technical reliability and maintenance are crucial issues in mediating both participants' and staffs' engagement with ICTs including CR institutions. Expectations of what technologies can do, and what they can do for participants, are very high, as are the sacrifices that people make to access them[23]. Technical un-sustainability and unreliability can increase fears and insecurity.

Technical sustainability includes effective and realistic responses at the different levels of support needed. While the relevant and effective community content is the core of any Community Radio all over the world, nothing will get on air without the technical part of the magic being in place. In a country like India, the importance of this cannot be exaggerated. Many of the community radios shall go off the air because of a combination of factors that surfaced due to insufficient technical planning. Such factors include inadequate technical overall configurations of the stations that were not geared to the specific local conditions but were provided as pre-prepared packages from different technological providers; inadequately prepared local staff without any particular (preventive) maintenance skills or routines;

[23] Slater, Don, Jo Tacchi, 2004, *ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction*, UNESCO, New Delhi

insufficient funds to cater for upcoming technical problems; and insufficient community mobilisation that would ensure community backing in times of trouble. Learning from experiences, the need is to opt for a vast set of different conditions that had to be in place, in order to avoid repeating the worst of the existing past experiences. Right kinds of equipments have to be in place so that problems of end-prices, replacement, and repair are not frequent. One needs to look for sturdiness, standard brands with spare-parts easily accessible, ease of preventive maintenance and compatability with other brands, simplicity. Technical hand holding support is another requirement after sale service, so as to provide the necessary initial training of the staff members responsible for the operation and of all station members in (preventive) maintenance.

Finally, none of the above will have the needed impact, without the station (management committee and executive body) having put into place precise policies, regulations, and resulting basic rules in the many different areas of work, including the technical area, such as: who has access to what equipment upon what level of training and insight. Who is responsible for the weekly, the monthly, the semi-annual, the annual preventive maintenance routines. And: when break-downs occur, who carries out which diagnostic, methodical routines, and with which sequence of reactions and connections? For capacitation for a sound technical sustainability it is must that the community programmers and technicians are being prepared to this reality through a sequence of training and capacitation actions in the technical area through a formal training course in Preventive Maintenance, an introduction to the most basic technical equipment operation rules and methods, focusing on the prevention of problems as well as front-line maintenance, including basic diagnostic routines.

With the carefully composed equipment packages, configured to match the individual situations, climates and conditions maximally, and this technical capacitation process in place, it is expected and hoped that the stations will be able to prevent a major part of the initial technical problems identified during early technical assessments of the community radio environment in the country.

4. **Social & Financial Sustainability:** Attempts to achieve social sustainability involves- securing the commitment, ownership and involvement of

community networks and organizations[24]. Financial viability shall be critical question to address once the system is in place. The question shall arise is how to ensure a security net for the station? The immediate answers could like in limiting costs to the absolute necessary minimum, on the one hand, and assisting to devise a multi-facetted system of sources of income – and capacity within the community to maintain this – on the other.

When on air, the stations will have paid staff members including the co-ordinators, the administrators, the mobilisers and the technicians. Besides of this, the volunteers will be organised in editorial groups, preparing adequate community programmes in their area of specialisation (health, education, culture, agriculture, environment, youth, women, etc.) through a combination of pre-prepared parts of the programme that give them time to go in-depth with the issues, and further on-air discussions of the themes. Alls these shall incur monthly and timely expenses that has to be figured out in advance. Also the cost is to include maintenance of both a pre-production studio and an on-air studio, with a combination of analogue and digital equipments.

While experiences have revealed the challenges involved in attaining financial sustainability, the related and most difficult challenge is to embed the issues in the community in such a way that they can relate to it and build a sense of ownership towards the initiative[25].

What is to be cautioned about is once the licence under the Community Radio policy is permitted, the station will have only three months time to show its running in a sustainable manner, that their studios are up and running otherwise the licenses could be cancelled. Ground preparations are extremely important as there are also issues of geographical constraints - one license per geographical area[26].

5. **Project Monitoring & Assessment:** In order to ensure a continued, coherent programme profile development, and mutual, continued training, CR stations must have a system in place wherein there is timely assessment and evaluation of functioning of programmes, costs elements, income sources etc. A work rhythm need to be developed wherein an overall weekly/fortnightly/monthly editorial meeting discusses and evaluates the

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[24] Slater, Don, Jo Tacchi, 2004, *ICT Innovations for Poverty Reduction*, UNESCO, New Delhi
[25] Ibid.,
[26] http://www.thehoot.org/story.asp?storyid=Web82112206130Hoot70039%20PM2545&pn=1

programmes of the past week, and comments on the initial preparation of the programmes for the coming week.

6. **Congenial Regulatory Framework:** the regulatory framework for community broadcasting should have regard to the sustainability and resourcing of the sector[27]. Licence fees should be set at a nominal level so as not exclude communities with few resources. There should be no unreasonable restrictions on sources of revenue. Community broadcasters should be encouraged to develop economic support from within their own community but assistance should also be provided through independently administered public funding mechanisms.

VI. Conclusion

The need and desire for functioning, community based and community controlled CR institutions for long-term social, economic, cultural and politic development cannot be overlooked. Community Radio contributes to social change by initiating or accompanying communication processes and should carry responsibility for being effective in facilitating civil society development in democratic processes[28]. However, what is fundamentally important is to take cognizance of the number of crucial sustainability factors which needs to be identified with adequate, working responses. The need is to carefully monitor the development, and to find adequate and creative responses to the arising needs by developing a range of diverse models and experiences that work on the ground based on different social, cultural and economic parameters.

Further while aiming at such mass technology oriented approach towards informed development, it is pertinent that the community itself forms part of the creators, movers and active beneficiaries of an appropriate knowledge-based local development using CR institutions[29]. A rightful combination of a multitude of training and capacitation responses, carefully designed to mutually reinforce each other, is one part of the response to the complex and persisting challenges at hand. A major one among these is the challenge to ensure that communities and the individuals therein are capacitated to provide and find access to information through CR

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[27]http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/files/23329/11616082521steve_buckley_speech.pdf/steve_buckley_speech.pdf

[28] http://amarcwiki.amarc.org/safe/pdf/crsia_part_v.pdf

[29] http://www.comunica.org/passion/

institutions that enables them to take informed decisions and proactively take control of their own lives.

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