

**World Bank CEERD External Advisory Committee  
Washington 12-13 June 2003**

**Report of the Community Radio Working Group**

Empowerment and civic engagement are not possible without citizen's access to information and voice. Effective pro-poor development strategies must therefore take account of the need to develop an open and participatory communications environment. This is borne out by a number of recent studies of the Bank and particularly the seminal project "Voices of the Poor". Community radio has proven to be one of the most effective means of providing access to communications, not only because radio is low cost and widespread, but because it is conducive to dialogue and to the oral tradition. It can also play a vital role in conflict prevention and post conflict reconciliation. It is appropriate that it should be a major focus for CEERD.

Recognition by the Bank of the potentially strategic contribution of community radio is to be welcomed even though other agencies, such as UNESCO, have been working in support of community radio for many years. Engagement by the Bank must focus especially on those areas where it can bring added value, particularly its strategic influence on the policy and enabling environment. Community radio can and should be an important component in Community Driven Development initiatives but there are challenges in implementation which also need to be analysed and understood.

The Participation and Civic Engagement Group of the Bank is leading on a series of initiatives to develop Bank practice in support of Community Radio. In April 2003 a Workshop brought together community media experts and Bank staff to discuss key issues, to identify areas for potential collaboration and to chart the design and implementation of pilots in selected countries. Work also commenced on a web-based Handbook on issues and best practice in community radio development.

The pilot countries proposed for the community radio initiative include Benin, Malawi, East Timor, Indonesia, Peru, Ecuador, Romania and Sri Lanka. In the cases of East Timor and Malawi the pilots are linked to existing Bank projects. The continuation of these projects and the commencement of the other pilots will depend on identifying appropriate sources of finance within the Bank to take them to implementation. The approach is one of "learning by doing" in order to better understand how the Bank can engage effectively in the development of participatory communications.

Initial analyses for the country pilots has shown a need to advance the regulatory frameworks, to provide training and technical support, to assist networking and the development of sector associations and to promote models of best practice. The countries proposed represent diverse and sometimes divergent environments in which a range of experiences and interventions can be tested and assessed.

In Malawi and Sri Lanka community radio is relatively under-developed and there is clear need for improvement and clarity in the policy and regulatory environment. In other countries, such as Benin and Peru, there are significant numbers of community radios, but there remain regulatory weaknesses and a need for capacity building. The lessons learned from the pilot projects will contribute to the development of strategies for long term sustainability and for scaling-up of the numbers of stations.

There are a few obstacles to effective Bank intervention which are already emergent from our assessment of country needs and pilot priorities. Bank instruments such as policy-based lending could play a positive and strategic role in opening up the enabling environment for community radio but media policy is a sensitive area for governments and intervention needs to be contextualised in a wider dialogue on participation, empowerment and good governance. Bank lending and financial support is best deployed through intermediary structures independent of the Bank and of the country government concerned. This may not always fit well with existing operational structures but it is an established principle of good media policy.

The Bank's engagement in support for community radio should be underpinned by a clear policy commitment at the international level. There are a number of communications policy issues at the international level which influence the enabling environment for grassroots communications. These include access to and competition for scarce spectrum resources, the international communication rights framework and bilateral and multilateral donor policies. We recommend the Bank use the opportunity of the World Summit on the Information Society to set out its own commitment to participatory communications as an essential component in poverty reduction and empowerment of the poorest and the most marginalised groups.