

## CIVIC VOICE: EMPOWERING THE POOR THROUGH COMMUNITY RADIO

Public interest radio programming, including by community radio stations, can play a vital role in empowering poor people, accelerating community and local level problem-solving, and introducing more demand for accountability. Community radio stations, either rural, cooperative, participatory, alternative, or popular radios, can facilitate information, voice, and local capacities for public debate on key development concerns. Developing informative programs about local issues and providing balanced reporting is one important way for local communities, including poor illiterate communities, to develop informed opinions, begin to form interest groups, and mobilize to address common concerns. The World Bank is working with partners such as AMARC, Radio Netherlands, and Search for Common Ground/European Center for Common Ground and others, to help strengthen the community radio sector in developing countries – particularly to help stations improve their programming and sustain themselves, and to identify policy and regulatory improvements that would facilitate a healthy public interest broadcasting sector, with a particular emphasis on community radio. This is a new area of World Bank involvement, being supported through the Bank's Program to enhance and sustain Civic Engagement, Empowerment, and Respect for Diversity (CEERD) as an integral part of development assistance.

The World Bank is focusing on community radio because such stations can be a significant vehicle for participatory development. Radio helps to erode one of the key aspects of poverty, that of isolation. Local news and educational programs can greatly enhance transparency, a cornerstone of democracy. Better knowledge of development projects promotes higher levels of participation and ownership, and discourages corruption. The end result can be stronger, more effective and appropriate development activities. By helping poor constituencies to develop their own local news programs and to present discussions of issues affecting their community, community radio broadcasting not only helps poor people to share information in a language they understand, but also fosters debate on issues, facilitates access to government decision meetings and events, and helps community members to organize themselves to identify and benefit from more opportunities.

For peoples who have a strong oral tradition (throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and indigenous populations of Latin America, for example), and for the great majority of poor people in developing countries who are illiterate, radio programming is especially vital for connectivity. While there is a great surge in interest in internet-based communication, it should not be forgotten that most poor people are illiterate, and do not have telephonic access that permits use of the internet. In those cases where internet

access is feasible, linking community radio stations with the internet can be a powerful communication tool. It can enable international news to be read to remote illiterate populations and inquiries from illiterate communities to be channeled to international sources of expertise.

In the late 1990s, the World Bank's support to community radio was limited to a small number of operational projects. For example, the *Community Empowerment and Local Governance Project (CEP)* in Timor-Leste supported and scaled up community broadcasting in the context of community-driven development. Aside from the small grants for community infrastructure and economic activities, this multi-sector CDD operation also funded cultural and social reconciliation efforts, and supported the establishment of community radios in selected districts. CEP support for radio began with the provision of small equipment and training for district reporters who are still a vital source of local stories for the national broadcaster. After that initial phase, the component helped with the establishment of district media and culture boards, which requested assistance with establishing community radios. CEP responded with broadcasting equipment, training to reporters, managers and technicians, and some small initial operating costs. These independent entities, owned by the community and directed by their community-based boards, are all on the air.

By 2002, the World Bank increased its engagement in community radio support with a multi-country Development Marketplace grant. This grant supported analysis of the enabling environment for community radio development in Malawi, Zambia, Ghana, and Nigeria, and the support to capacity-building of community radio stations on a pilot basis in Malawi, Zambia, and Ghana. This was followed in April, 2003, by a workshop of expert-practitioners, at which pilot countries were identified to extend community radio sector support linked to Bank lending. Pilots are being planned within community-driven development (CDD) projects in Timor-Leste (expanding on CEP support), Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Malawi, and within policy-based operations in Peru and Benin.

The pilots are intended to

- promote enabling environments (development of favorable policy and legal frameworks),
- enhance content development (training in radio programming coupled with networking and exchanges), and
- provide grassroots support (capacity building in station management, community involvement, sustainability).

Specific pilot activities will include professional training for community radio reporters and round tables to enhance networking among community radios (Malawi and Benin) and program development on social auditing (Peru). Learning workshops will be carried out to enhance the programming capacities of community radios and their supporting organizations (Timor-Leste and Sri Lanka). In Indonesia, the Kecamatan Development Project has been using community radio to develop messages regarding the project and to strengthen civic oversight at the local level. To clarify how to improve institutional mechanisms and practices for informed choice-making, local governance, and empowerment of poor communities in Indonesia, a diagnostic study is about to get underway, to supply basic knowledge about the country context and contributions of community radios. These pilot efforts will provide a basis for the Bank to shape and expand its lending support for community radio development.

Networking and continual learning is a key part of this effort. The Bank is both learning from its partners in this sector and providing the infrastructure for local and national networks in various developing countries to exchange their experience and learn from each other. The Bank is also preparing an on-line Operational Manual, which will provide “know how” to Task Team Leaders and other audiences. This will include an electronic database of analytical tools, field practices, media assessment reports, organizational contacts, and a pool of experts, among others.

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