Organisational Structures and Strategies

Ian Pringle and Polly Gaster

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Organisational Structures and Strategies

The challenge of community multimedia often has less to do with technology than it does with organising. Organisational management is at the heart of *any* enterprise and how you organise is *essential* to any multimedia strategy you might have for your community's development using multimedia tools.

Organisational considerations are greatly influenced by your local situation and there are no *off-the-shelf* solutions. There are some basic principles to be followed and fundamental roles and responsibilities to be filled.

Details of organisation will be varied in accordance with the type of CMC — the scale, the location, the prevailing culture, national legislation and many other factors. It is up to you to decide what meets your needs, and there are lots of different models for you to look at and choose from or adapt.

You might want to borrow ideas from other organisations in the area, from other CMCs, telecentres, or community radio stations in or outside your country. You can also get samples of statutes or codes of conduct from manuals on the Internet.

All aspects of running a CMC are interrelated. In terms of organisation, you need to think carefully about many things, including the cost and scale of facilities, strategies for human resources, programming, and content. Your CMC must make organisational capacity development a priority in addition to other priorities such as building technical and production capacity and providing good programmes and reliable services.

People-oriented organising

The basic building blocks of your organisation are people. They need to be represented and included in both the conceptual and operational parts of how your CMC is organised.

Networks

Organisation starts at the grassroots level – in and amongst the social **networks** that already exist in your community. Ideally the CMC is a hub within a broader network that includes both social movements and local information and communications channels. Existing in a mutually beneficial relationship, the CMC simultaneously relies on and strengthens local networks of groups and individuals.

The communities of some CMCs have strong pre-existing networks; other CMC initiatives focus on developing networks as part of their strategy. Media and ICTs have an influential role to play in networking of any kind.

Partnerships

Local networks also extend to partnerships in a broader sense and in a wide variety of arrangements and relationships.

Some CMCs are coalitions of different local media and social organisations that sometimes include government or local businesses. Although partnerships, especially coalitions, are hard to manage, they have rewarding benefits.

General guidelines for CMC organisation

- *Be democratic*
- *Be accountable*
- *Ensure the participation of all CMC workers – staff, volunteers, collaborators*
- *Ensure representation of all sections of the community and provide them the space to defend their interests*
- *Don't be aligned with any one section or interest group to the detriment of others*
- *Be flexible and practical.*

Your CMC should be open to both associations as well as practical arrangements where two or more organizations work together to mutually benefit from one another.

Associations

The enormous power of association and strength in numbers gives CMCs an opportunity to link across other borders and barriers: the well-known international NGO *Reporters without Borders* is an apt example. These types of associations are uniquely important in crisis situations. Membership in well-reputed organisations can reinforce the credibility of your CMC and facilitates the adoption of international codes and standards in your organisation.

Your CMC should strongly consider joining associations, working in cooperative forums, and actively participating in networks supported by your own time and funds.

Using email and the Internet are good ways to network. There are useful online discussion groups, email lists and other informative and interactive resources available on the Internet. Where possible, it may also be worthwhile to participate in national, regional or even international meetings, especially if the meetings are action and/or network oriented.

Organisational structures

Assemblies and constitutions

Your CMC is based on certain principles and guidelines and operates through an authority that should be responsible to your main stakeholders. An official structure, a constitution, and a regular gathering of stakeholders should be at the **heart** of your community's CMC makeup.

Codes of conduct

Editorial policies and journalistic ethics are important issues that need to be thoroughly discussed and agreed. Many countries already have press organisations that have codes of conduct and/or national legislation that define freedom of expression, right of reply, access to sources and the need for balanced reporting.

These models can be adopted, or incorporated into your CMC's own editorial policy, which should also reflect local concerns and needs.

Local pressures on a radio station are always strong from many different quarters, so you will find that the existence of a well-publicised editorial policy and guarantees of support from the committee that represents the community are important tools to defend the radio journalists.

In some regions, networks of community radios have formed a coordinating group and follow an agreed list of principles with regard to the coverage of elections. The community radios will only broadcast civic education and news items, and not party political propaganda - except in the form of short paid-for commercials.

Stakeholders need to be represented in decision-making with accountability to the people at the grassroots level. Elections greatly enhance a CMC's claim to represent the local community and set a progressive example. This is true only if elections are fair, free of outside influence and any form of overt political pressure.

Although procedures vary from place to place, CMCs are generally rooted in some type of association or group. The authority that formulates policy and elects or appoint representatives is the **assembly** of stakeholders, shareholders or members.

Alongside its legal registrations, a constitution or similar document is the written basis of an organization, usually explaining its origin and purpose in addition to its mode of operation. Policies, rules and regulations are rooted here, even if they exist in more detail in other documents. (See annex on Developing a constitution).

The constitution and other documents developed from it are what define an organization, both in

principle and in practice. There are numerous models of organization and usually there are different local options for a CMC to choose from. For example, a CMC might be a society, a cooperative, a non-profit corporation, or an association. In some situations, a CMC might even officially be a business or government department. (See example of a constitution in annex).

The type of CMC organization you opt for is very much related to your own unique environment — legally, culturally and practically — in terms of both organizational structure and governance of the media and technologies.

All that is written and intended must also be implemented. The organization itself is the follow through. A CMC can be truly community oriented by simultaneously adopting an independent, collective, and cooperative nature.

> Media organisations should always adhere to a principle of independence. CMCs should be autonomously organised with rights and mechanisms for self-determination.
>
> Especially in the context of changing media environments, CMCs and other community media often come about through the efforts of like-minded social organisations and advocacy groups, in which groups sponsor new local media channels.
>
> The notion and practice of independence is at the heart of the credibility of any media channel as well as its sustainability.

Membership

Whatever the topic, it is worth beginning with the basic building block of your CMC: your community members.

Whether officially, through a cooperative or other form of organisation, or simply through their involvement as volunteers, listeners and users, your goal should be to make 'members of the community' also 'members of the CMC'.

Ideally a broad community membership will form the basis of your CMC's local ownership, a key ingredient of the success of any CMC, especially your sustainability.

Boards and Committees

Whether they are called "boards" or "working groups," "steering committees" or whether they go by another name, you need to have an official body that literally or symbolically represents your local community's ownership of the CMC.

As with all aspects of your operations, it is best if this group is truly active and not just a nominal body; however, in practice, many CMCs have official faces that are separate to some degree from the working parts. Regardless of the exact shape that a CMC's structure takes, the important things are that your CMC's operations are **well managed**, that **decision-making** is **transparent** and **accountable.**

Official bodies are particularly important for decision-making, dealing with official policies and documents, and for handling other groups – from government to local community organisations. Your committee must ensure that your whole CMC operation reflects the character of your community and that it is open to all its members.

Especially for CMCs that operate with little or no staffing, committees can be very useful in ensuring that essential responsibilities are covered.

Cooperatives

How can people and groups in the community become owners – in principle and in practice?

One of the best models for community media organisations is the cooperative, because vested local interests build it around people's participation and ownership.

Cooperatives simultaneously provide for local ownership and financial investment (to varying degrees), as well as for elected representation. The CMC guarantees community involvement by providing membership and shares. One interesting example is the Lumbini Information and Communication Cooperative in Nepal.

For more information about Radio Lumbini, contact lumbinifm@mos.com.np.

Creating working groups

The best way to ensure participation is to create a number of working groups according to topics or areas of activity. Depending on your priorities, you can create working groups for:

- Cultural programmes for radio
- Women's programmes
- Training
- Health education
- Local newspaper

In this way different kinds of people can be brought into CMC activity - ranging from school students who want to present music programmes on the radio to local health workers who can advise on the content of an AIDS prevention campaign.

Division of tasks and responsibilities

The relationship between the governing bodies (usually voluntary), paid staff and volunteers is often complex. Usually, the paid staffs do a large part of the day-to-day work and ensure the management and implementation of all the planned activities.

Volunteers will be particularly useful for the radio, for mobilisation activities, for producing information and other initiatives.

The governing body supervise the staff, keep an eye on the accounts, and guarantee good relations with the community and external bodies.

Certain areas of operations should be taken very seriously and built into a structure for which your committee or other official body takes responsibility. You might break it down as follows:

- Administration: finances, registrations
- Coordination: volunteers, training, fundraising
- Technical: facilities, equipment maintenance
- Programme/content: local relevance, authenticity.

Operational systems

Your CMC's operations are facilitated by structures and systems that allow for sustainable organisational management, collective decision-making, and continuity of experience and institutionalisation of knowledge.

The structures include mechanisms for producing programme content, operating and maintaining facilities, and managing financial and logistical administration.

These activities are coordinated by the CMC's human resources — your core team, staff and volunteers. The way you organise your CMC should be as inclusive as possible, guided by the same principles of equity and social justice as your programmes and content.

Consultative, consensual and collective decision-making is a demanding approach, however it is essential and ultimately rewarding. Working in teams and through systems, and valuing local leadership and role models ultimately leads away from excessive dependence on strong personalities toward a more collective way of organising.

When we start to think of CMCs as community centres, it is important to recognise their role as spaces for innovation and experimentation. This is where your community members' expressive and creative potentials can be fully realised, instinctively responding to the community's local needs.

Organisational development

Meetings

Your core team of staff, committed volunteers, and active committee members should meet regularly and discuss areas of common concern and individual responsibility.

The idea is to have a system for coordinating activities and managing your CMC as a team. Use meetings to update the core CMC team on all the major areas of operation. In addition to bulletin boards and emails, meetings are an essential means of communication.

Tips on meetings

Remember that meetings are a means to an end. They should be governed by an appropriate set of guidelines.

- Meetings should always have a chairperson. An independent chairperson should not be a participant, but is responsible to **facilitate** the process and discussion of an agreed-upon agenda.

- Agendas should follow an established format that includes
  – approval of previous minutes
  – review of CMC operations
  – follow-up on assignments
  – new items
  – correspondence and visitors

- Meetings should be flexible and human, but must also stick to agendas and set time limits for discussion. The chairperson should manage the meeting fairly and effectively.

- Be action oriented: assign responsibilities, document and circulate them and always follow-up at the next meeting.

- Meetings should be inclusive and allow all participants the opportunity to voice their opinions.

- Be transparent and accountable to your CMC stakeholders: post agendas, keep minutes and make them accessible.

- Hold meetings at regular times; there can be short daily meetings or more comprehensive weekly or monthly meetings.

Policy development

Roles of staff and committees should be clearly defined and written down. Staff members should have written job descriptions and committees should have a clear terms of reference. Accessible documentation makes roles and responsibilities clear to everyone.

Without going overboard, your CMC's organization should give time to developing systems and policies that govern the way the organization functions and document the process.

Strategic planning and organisational development

CMCs should engage in an organizational development process that includes research and analysis and leads to plans and strategies that address local needs with local resources.

Does your CMC have these policies?

- *Fundraising*
  - *Advertising*
  - *Financial accounting*

- *Human Resources*
  - *Hiring*
  - *Evaluation*
  - *Equity*

- *Programming*
  - *Freedom of expression*
  - *Prohibitions on promotion of hatred, obscenity*
  - *Guidelines for elections*

Examples of outputs from these processes are new policies, as well as specialised strategies like business plans, marketing, membership or fundraising campaigns.

Consultation and feedback

Regular research will help you to keep track of the CMC users and participants, who they are and what they want.

Local correspondents at village level can also help to check on how the radio programmes are being received in terms of technical quality, language comprehensibility, and relevance of content. They might want to hold meetings and invite questions, suggestions, and feedback.

Some places create listener groups followed by discussion and others offer associate membership to anyone who wants to join. Joining implies paying a small regular contribution to support the CMC and also being able to participate in assemblies to give opinions about how the CMC is being run and what it should be doing.

The structures mentioned above will guarantee solid links with the most important people of all your radio listeners and information technology users. Your organisational structures will change as your CMC grows. What matters is that the leadership, rules, and channels of communication are clear and publicly known.

Photo courtesy: Habby Bugalama

Sengerema Telecentre (Tanzania) Manager explains the role of the centre to the community

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