Pioneering Community Radio
Impacts of IPDC Assistance in Nepal

Excerpts from the evaluation report on the IPDC-supported community radio projects in Nepal

The purpose of the International Programme
for the Development of Communication (IPDC)
is to mobilize international assistance to develop free,
independent and pluralistic media in the developing countries.
The Programme guides media institutions in developing project
proposals and annually funds an average of 50-60 media development
projects, through voluntary contributions received from donor countries.

The IPDC stamp with its multilateral, intergovernmental backing,
has legitimized the community radio project in Nepal,
contributing directly to the government's initial, reluctant agreement
and its growing recognition of community radio as a development tool.

IPDC's endorsement has also encouraged bilateral support,
from donors like Danida that have worked with UNESCO in other countries,
as well as agencies that have no in-country presence,
such as the Communication Assistance Foundation (Netherlands).

The Programme's small project approach, involving short
implementation periods and modest financial inputs,
has both necessitated and facilitated other donors' involvement.

Evaluator: Ian Pringle

Pioneering Community Radio in Nepal

Excerpts from an external evaluation of IPDC asssistance to Nepal

IPDC's support for community radio in Nepal has been a strategic, defining factor in the growth of the community media sector. The Programme has regularly supported small, distinct projects that have catalyzed the growth of the sector at different times by promoting replicable models, establishing precedents and benchmarks, and building the capacity of key organizational players.

Between 1993 and 1997, IPDC played a key role in the establishment of the country's first independent broadcaster, Radio Sagarmatha. In 1999, the Programme was instrumental in setting up Nepal's first rural radio licensee, Community Radio Madanpokhara.

In 2002, IPDC provided critical support to Radio Lumbini, the region's first cooperative broadcaster, and Radio Swargadwari, a station in the heart of the country's armed conflict. In 2006, IPDC supported the Nepal Association of Community Radio Broadcasters in a broad, sector-wide initiative. Community radio has gone from one license in 1997 to nearly 90 at the end of 2007.

IPDC has conferred a strong sense of legitimacy to the movement for community radio in Nepal, particularly in its early days and subsequently during the period of civil conflict when media operations were extremely difficult to maintain and press freedoms were severely restricted.

IPDC engaged local groups at a critical time in the country's development and was the first international agency to put its weight behind community radio. The establishment of specific stations, supported by IPDC, was interwoven with the growth and development of Nepal's overall media system.

The association with IPDC has, over the years, encouraged other agencies and donors to support the growth of community radio in Nepal, including Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and the USA.

The initial community radio projects continue to be at the forefront of the movement's growth in Nepal. Radio stations supported by the Programme - Sagarmatha, Madanpokhara and Lumbini - are internationally recognized and the models they offered have been widely replicated.

Although the sector in Nepal faces many challenges, the IPDC approach of relatively small projects, each building on the outcomes of previous projects and addressing current sectoral needs has contributed to the gradual build-up of national capacity – both of individual stations as well as national organizations and associations - which offers Nepal the best possible chance in facing current and future challenges.

Project title	Period	Budget
Radio Sagarmatha	1995-1997	$ 60,000
Radio Madanpokhara	1999-2000	$ 29,000
Strengthening Pluralistic Media	2000-2002	$ 35,000
Consolidation of Community radio	2006-2007	$ 18,000

IPDC's contributions are recognized and respected for their non-partisan, multilateral character.

This was particularly important during the long gestation period for the first license in the mid-1990s and during the protracted civil conflict.

UNESCO is valued by community radio groups and other stakeholders as an unbiased source concerning best practices of community radio from the South Asia region and internationally.

Cost Effectiveness

Considering the outcomes, IPDC's approach has been exceptionally cost-effective relative to other international development efforts. Outstanding factors include the Programme's emphasis on locally generated proposals driven by real demand and the existing organizational structures of local implementing partners, the absence of overhead support or contributions to large project infrastructures, as well as the focus on equipment and capacity building rather than operational costs, which has, in turn, served to facilitate local contributions, particularly of human resources, and to mobilize additional partners.

Development Impact

Media pluralism

The contribution of community radio to promoting media pluralism in Nepal can be illustrated by the example of Radio Sagarmatha, which broadcasts to the Kathmandu Valley. From the outset and to the present day, Radio Sagarmatha has worked to present listeners with a combination of issues and entertainment, social discussions and music, and to offer a conduit for the wide range of voices and opinions that were previously unheard on Nepal's radio channels. The success and popularity of Radio Sagarmatha's innovations in public interest programming, from editorials, news and magazines to local music and cultural programmes, spurred private broadcasters to offer more than mere popular commercial music and entertainment programmes.

Public participation

On a daily basis, the country's community radio stations take listeners into the locations of everyday life as lived by the listeners themselves. With one of its major goals to reach policymakers, stations throughout the country reach into the corridors of power, in district and village structures and in national government ministries in Kathmandu. Community Radio Madanpokhara has radio representatives (community reporters), radio clubs and women's communication groups in each of the districts' 35 village areas and in the headquarters'

municipal wards. The station regularly promotes and facilitates community meetings bringing together all local stakeholders, including government and development agencies representatives, teachers, health workers, etc. Other stations have similar networks of members and listener groups.
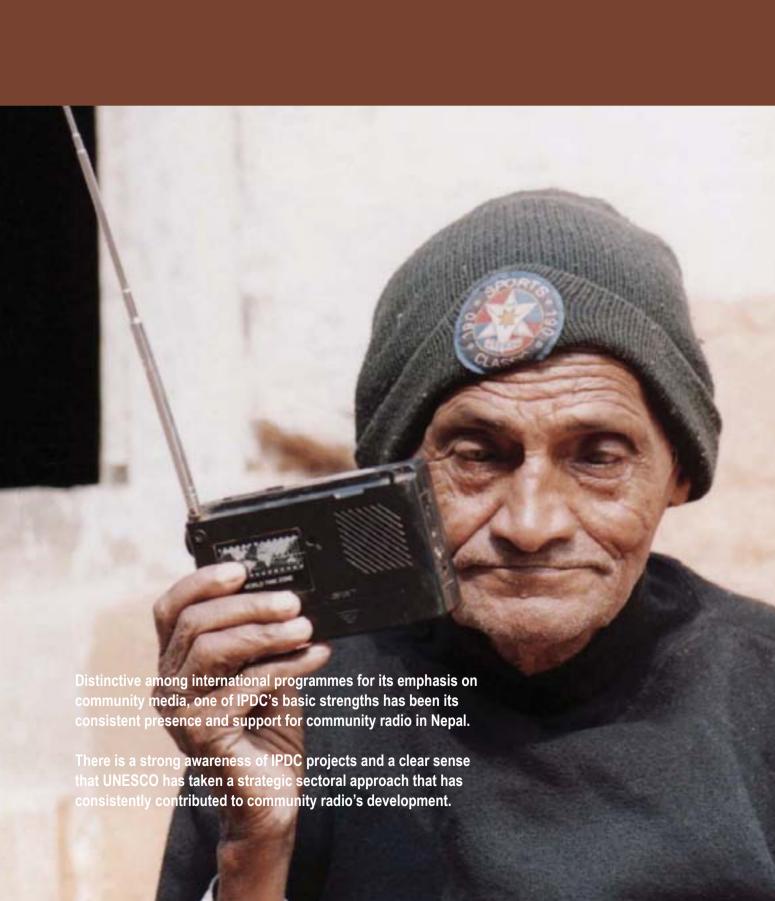
Transparency and accountability in governance

Public affairs programming on community radio stations across the country has denounced corruption, and questioned the use of public funds and the implementation of public projects. The success of investigative and 'watchdog' public affairs programmes in contributing to transparency and accountability in governance and decision-making has been repeated through Nepal.

Following in a strong tradition of 'mission journalism', effectively set for radio by Radio Sagarmatha, virtually every community station has concrete examples of how their programming has exposed issues of weak governance, corruption, and ignorant and unrepresentative decision-making in public-community spaces and prompted corrective action. A good example is Radio Sagarmatha's long running and highly successful programme, Aaja ka Kura (Today's Talk) that started in 2000.

Everyday in evening primetime, the host takes on major social, economic and political issues affecting Nepali society using a mixture of interviews, round table discussions and listener phone calls. An excerpt from a review of the programme in the weekly Nepali Times newspaper is instructive: "Kiran Pokhrel hosts Radio Sagarmatha's best-known prime time radio talk programme Aaja ka Kura. He has talked day-in, day-out, seven days a week about everything under the Nepali sun: the dissolution of parliament, life without local governments, mismanagement of hospitals, vehicle emission standards, the martial rape bill, duped Nepali migrant workers, you name it. It's now come to the point where you're nobody unless you have been grilled by Kiran on Aaja ka Kura".

Kiran is completely and passionately submerged in the world of radio, and he says it doesn't matter that salaries in community radio are not very high. "It is the satisfaction of doing it right, money can't buy you that. And the gratification is knowing that the issues we broadcast influence policy decisions."

Distinctive among international programmes for its emphasis on community media, one of IPDC's basic strengths has been its consistent presence and support for community radio in Nepal.

There is a strong awareness of IPDC projects and a clear sense that UNESCO has taken a strategic sectoral approach that has consistently contributed to community radio's development.

Conclusions

IPDC has played an important role in realizing a strong sense of local ownership over its community radio. From the outset, the drivers of the movement in Nepal have been local groups and organizations, both at the national and local level.

The real growth of the sector is due first and foremost to the commitment, determination and creativity of community radio advocates and practitioners, who collectively have shown a remarkable ability to conceptualize and execute activities relating to media pluralism and journalism.

IPDC's most significant contribution has been in focusing and building this local capacity and allowing it to remain naturally at the centre of the sector's growth, which has been gradual, organic and, perhaps most importantly, sustained.

IPDC's approach has been highly appropriate in the Nepali context for several reasons:

- IPDC's financial contributions are manageable for small organizations with limited administrative and organizational capacity.

- IPDC projects are generally implemented by local organizations within their existing organizational and human resource frameworks; in other words, they do not require large additional project staff or infrastructure, which are difficult if not impossible to maintain and tend to skew the local playing field by introducing external structures, international salaries, etc.

- IPDC projects have specific objectives and tangible outputs, identified by project proponents, which has emphasized concrete results that clearly contribute to media development in the short term.

- Along with financial inputs, IPDC projects are accompanied by the technical support of UNESCO Communication and Information Advisors and other experts who are able to support local planning and implementation without skewing the human resources or budgets of local partners.

IPDC as a catalyst

IPDC's approach has been catalytic, initiating and facilitating major developments at key times. Factors include the Programme's multilateral profile and its function in conferring legitimacy, as well as UNESCO's recognized expertise in the field of community radio; the Organization is identified as both a 'trailblazer,' pioneering new ideas and innovations, as well as the 'guardian' of accepted community radio principles and practices, a function which has enormous importance at this stage in the sector's development in Nepal.
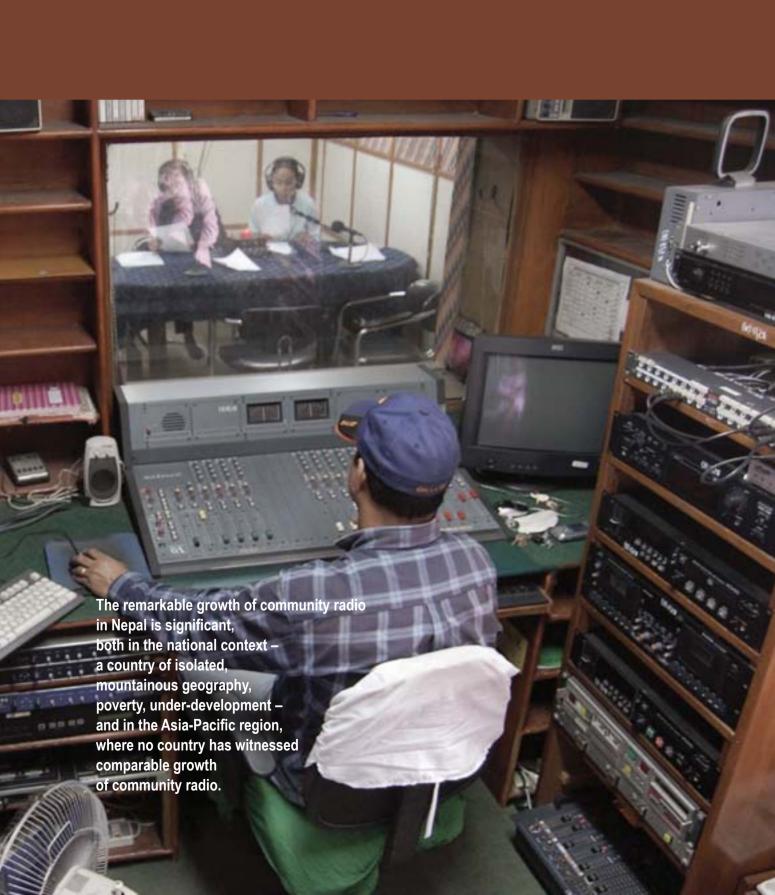
Growth in the Nepali community radio sector is impressive and there is a certain maturity to it, major challenges notwithstanding. There are multiple networks, a half dozen independent content production groups, distribution systems using satellite and internet, as well as a national support and a member-based association of stations.

Multilateral support

IPDC's contributions are recognized and respected for their non-partisan, multilateral character. This was particularly important during the long gestation period for the first license in the mid-1990s and during the protracted civil conflict. UNESCO is valued by community radio groups and other stakeholders as an unbiased source concerning best practices of community radio from the South Asia region and internationally.

Human rights and development goals

With clear goals and objectives of its own, IPDC has effectively promoted a progressive, development-oriented approach to media and its growth and expansion in Nepal. The Programme is known to support public interest media development, explicitly linked to human rights, cultural diversity, education, equity, and participatory development and governance. The role of media in addressing fundamental rights to information and expression must continue to be a core development objective of both IPDC projects and the Programme itself.

The remarkable growth of community radio
in Nepal is significant,
both in the national context –
a country of isolated,
mountainous geography,
poverty, under-development –
and in the Asia-Pacific region,
where no country has witnessed
comparable growth
of community radio.

What role did community media play in helping to restore democracy in Nepal?

At the World Congress on Communication for Development 2006 held in Rome, James Deane interviewed Raghu Mainaly from the Association of Community Broadcasters in Nepal. During the interview, Mainaly explained the critical role community media played in defending Nepal's young democracy. Below see excerpts from the interview.

Deane: Raghu, tell us about the events leading up to April 2006 and the seismic political change that has happened there in the last year or so.

Mainaly: Something happened in Nepal this year that has never happened before in our history. About four million people out of a total population of 22 million came out onto the streets.

In February 2005, our king took over all political power in the country. He started governing through direct rule, and this was a situation that we never imagined would happen. His forces cut off all Internet connections, phone lines and transport links. They even sealed off our international airport. The army was deployed to all media houses and either arrested political leaders or placed them under house arrest.

Deane: So earlier this year, there were suddenly four million people on the streets? Can you make any connection between this extraordinary event of four million people coming out onto the streets in a generally peaceful protest and community media in Nepal?

Mainaly: Yes, there is a direct correlation. From the very beginning, community media programmes informed people that freedom of speech and freedom of expression were the people's rights, not just a media person's rights. We educated people about their rights, using programmes very strategically to attract the attention of people, arranging a lot of unique events that would get onto the front pages of the newspapers and international media also.

Deane: How many radio stations are there in Nepal?

Mainaly: More than 50 radio stations across the whole of Nepal. These cover more than 65 percent of the total population.

Deane: Does this radio network reach the majority [geography] of the country?

Mainaly: Yes. And this network started working together as soon as the king began banning the news. In fact, we were told, "don't broadcast anything except music!" So then we started singing the news!

Deane: You sang the news?

Mainaly: [LAUGHS.] So we sang the news, because the government had not banned the content, only the form in which it could be delivered.

The recent resolution A/62/205
"Information in the service of humanity"
adopted by the United Nations General Assembly
at its 62nd session on 17 December 2007

"urges all countries, organizations of the United Nations system
and all others concerned to provide full support
for the International Programme for the Development of Communication
of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,
which should support both public and private media."

What role did community media play in helping to restore democracy in Nepal?

Deane: So just to be clear, this was not just one radio station, but a whole network of radio stations who were using very imaginative ways of continuing to report on the crisis?

Mainaly: Yes, and then we started to read the Constitution to people, particularly those articles with most relevance to poor people. We read these in Nepali and more than 20 local languages.

Deane: So this was a process of really informing people about their constitutional, legal rights within the context of this political crisis?

Mainaly: Yes, both of the rights of the people and the role and duties of the government. The king had said he had taken these steps to resolve the political crisis. But, instead of dealing with the threat of the Maoist terror, his actions were leading to more fear, ignorance and terror. And looking at situations in other countries, we could not find any examples of where the kinds of steps he had taken had worked. Every hour, we broadcast music to all the stations, the content of which was: "From every village and every home, wake up and defend the interests of the country. If you have a pen, wake up with a pen. If you have an instrument, wake up with an instrument. And if you have nothing in your hand, raise your voice." We broadcast that music every hour.

Deane: Why was protest peaceful? Was there anything this radio network was doing that made this protest a forceful, mass response of four million people, but one that was, nevertheless, a largely peaceful one on the streets?

Mainaly: We broadcast a lot of interviews with civil society leaders, doctors, engineers, lawyers, university teachers and others who all requested the people to act peacefully. We were creating a forum for a range of people to come and appeal to the people to protest but to do so peacefully.

Deane: But were you not yourselves also broadcasting messages warning of the dangers of violence?

Mainaly: Yes, when there were four million people out on the street, and some of us were in jail, we broadcast every half-hour a short spot urging peaceful protest. These spots were about one-minute long, and the content was that the country had suffered greatly from violence for many years, and that more conflict is not the way to get freedom and peace. "Please," we said, "follow the peaceful way."

Deane: For those who are looking at supporting community media, how long has it taken to get to where you are now? What needed to happen to get to where you are now as a movement within the country?
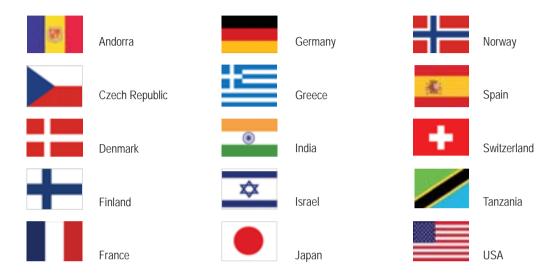
Mainaly: For this particular movement it took about 15 months. For the community media movement as a whole, it has been a decade-long struggle.

Deane: And was this entirely from your own resources? Or did external organisations help?

Mainaly: Yes, we got a lot of support. This was not an individual, or even just an organisational effort, but a national effort and an international effort with so many organisations involved. First, we have to name UNESCO, which helped support us from the very beginning.

Community Media Forum -
World Congress on Communication for Development, 2006.

Donor countries that supported IPDC in 2006-2007

Andorra

Czech Republic

Denmark

Finland

France

Germany

Greece

India

Israel

Japan

Norway

Spain

Switzerland

Tanzania

USA