

**Giving Voice to Local Communities:  
Community radio and related policies**

Mr Chairman,  
Distinguished delegates,  
Colleagues and friends.

It is an honour to be invited to address this joint meeting of the Councils of the International Programme for the Development of Communication and the Information for All Programme. The challenge of today's debate, "To Give Voice to Local Communities", is a matter of concern to us all. Let me take this opportunity, in particular, to pay tribute to the commitment and tenacity of UNESCO, over many years, in championing the voices of local communities.

I have been invited here in my capacity as President of AMARC, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters. AMARC is an international non-governmental organisation which groups together over 5,000 community radio stations and their federations in more than 110 countries. When AMARC was founded, in 1983, what we call "community radio" barely existed outside Europe, the Americas and Australia.

Today community radio is not only well established in Europe and the Americas. It is widespread across Africa; it has become a growing force in Asia and the Pacific; and it has entered the mainstream discourse of development professionals and agencies.

The growth of community radio is a story of people and communities striving to speak out and to be heard. Community radio has provided a means of empowerment and of self-reliance. It has enabled people to engage in dialogue about their conditions and their livelihoods. And it has contributed to the defence of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The growth of community radio is a story in which the pursuit of social and development goals has been deeply entwined with the struggle for human and political rights.

I will speak more about community radio, but first let me make some remarks on the information society and on the pursuit of international development goals.

Over the last twenty years, as the global network of community broadcasters has grown to what it is today, we have witnessed the emergence of new communication technologies - technologies that enable access to information globally and instantaneously. The emergence

of new information and communication technologies has rightly been compared to the industrial revolution. It has contributed to economic globalisation and has enabled new international social movements to proliferate. But it also threatens to amplify the gross asymmetry in people's access to information and communication.

People living in poverty face particular barriers to voice and access to information that are directly associated with the conditions in which they live<sup>1</sup>. These include barriers of cost, for example for the purchase or rental of communications services and equipment. They include social barriers including discrimination in access to services, lack of education including illiteracy, and lack of provision in appropriate languages. They include lack of basic infrastructure including electricity and transportation. They include political obstacles including repression and lack of will of states to allow democratic access to information and voice for the most marginalized groups as well as direct forms of censorship and lack of information about knowledge and information systems.

This asymmetry is frequently called the "digital divide" but it is more accurately understood as a "communications divide" that pre-dates the new digital technologies.

In recent years there has also been a shift in the thinking of development professionals, and development institutions, from an excessive emphasis on market driven economic growth and technology transfer to a more people-centred discourse.<sup>2</sup>

In this perspective voicelessness and powerlessness have come to be seen as key dimensions of poverty while democracy, equity and civil rights are seen as not only intrinsically desirable but as directly contributing to the realisation of human security, well-being and opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winning economist, has argued consistently and forcefully that no substantial famine has ever occurred in any independent country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press.<sup>4</sup>

I believe it is essential that we frame our debate on "Giving Voice to Local Communities" in the perspective of human rights as well as that of social and economic development.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bellagio Symposium on Media, Freedom and Poverty

<sup>2</sup> Balit, Sylvia, Communication for Isolated and Marginalised Groups, Blending the Old and the New, Paper for Ninth United Nation Round Table on Communications for Development, FAO, Rome 2004

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 6, World Development Report 2000/2001, Attacking Poverty, New York: Oxford University Press  
<http://www.worldbank.org/wdr>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Sen, A. (1981) Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation. Oxford: Clarendon Press; and Sen, A. (2000) Development as Freedom. New York: Anchor Books

Sen has offered four reasons why media freedom is important.

First he argues that freedom of speech and the ability to communicate is intrinsically desirable for well-being and the quality of human life. The suppression of people's ability to communicate directly reduces quality of life even if the authoritarian country that imposes such a constraint happens to provide other social and economic protections.

Second, it can have an important protective function in giving voice to the neglected and the disadvantaged. The means to speak out can contribute greatly to human security. Political elites faced with public criticism in the media have a strong incentive to take timely action to avoid crises and to counter inequity in access to resources.

Third, the media have an informational function in disseminating knowledge and allowing critical scrutiny. This function is crucial to empowerment and holding elites to account.

Fourth the media have a crucial role to play in value formation enabling public adaptation to change and the local appropriation of knowledge and information.

From this perspective, communication policies that guarantee the rights to freedom of expression and access to information can contribute directly to the achievement of development goals. Policies that suppress these rights can have a detrimental effect.

Without access to voice poor people are unable to participate in debate or to express their opinions on public policies that affect them directly. Without access to information poor people are unaware of their rights and entitlements, are unable to challenge decisions and lack the knowledge to take effective action to improve their conditions.

\*\*

Mr Chairman,

Let me now turn to community broadcasting.

Local and community-based media have become recognized as having a particular role to play for people and communities facing poverty, exclusion and marginalisation.<sup>5</sup> They can assist in providing access to information and voice, including in local and vernacular

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Declaration of the Ninth United Nations Round Table on Communications for Development (2004) Rome: Food and Agriculture Organisation

languages. They can reinforce traditional forms of communication such as storytelling, group discussion and theatre and they can enable grassroots participation in policy-making and democracy. They use technologies which are appropriate and affordable. In doing so, they reach out to the most remote communities and to people from all walks of life.

The most widespread and accessible communications technologies remain the traditional media, particularly radio – an oral medium, one that is low cost and that is already receivable by 90 per cent of the world's population. For just a few thousand dollars worth of equipment, a community of 100,000 people or more can be served by a community radio station.

To understand the particular role of community radio we have to recognize the two dominant media forms in the world today, differentiated by public or private ownership.

There are some good models of publicly owned broadcasting with independent governance and editorial arrangements and a range of public interest programming. But many state owned public media are still not sufficiently independent of the government. Instead of truly serving the public interest they remain the instrument of the government in power. Instead of dialogue with their audience they maintain a one-way mode of communication.

There is almost no country in the world today that is not, by one means or another, also reached by private commercial media whether through the liberalisation of broadcast licensing or through the rapid growth of satellite services. Private commercial media can contribute to the plurality of choice but they tend to pay little attention to the needs and concerns of the poorer sections of society. In many countries growing concentration of ownership has had the effect of reducing the diversity of private media. Media concentration has allowed powerful media corporations to emerge that wield enormous political influence while remaining accountable only to their private owners and the marketplace.

Today, however, in most countries and all of the regions of the world, a third form of media, community broadcasting, has emerged from civil society to find a place alongside the established public and private media. Community broadcasting can be considered a third sector of the media landscape - independent, with social and not commercial objectives.

Community broadcasting has developed in response to the needs of grassroots social movements and community-based organisations to find an accessible and affordable means to express their own issues, concerns, cultures and languages, and to create an alternative to the state-owned public broadcaster and the growth of private commercial media.

The existence and the practice of community broadcasting is an expression of a more participatory attitude to democracy and the growth of strong and dynamic civil society organisations. It can be considered a form of public service broadcasting, but this is a public service broadcasting not from the top-down, but rather from the grassroots-up.

\*\*

Mr Chairman

Let me finish by setting out some actions and policies that are needed.

Despite the growing recognition of community broadcasting there remains a need to raise awareness and acceptance of the idea that communities have the right to own and operate their own community media. There is still much to be done in many countries, to establish policies, laws and regulations that enable and encourage community broadcasting.

Alongside the laws and regulations that enable community broadcasting there is a need to build capacity among community-based organisations to develop sustainable models of community media that contribute to the social and economic well-being of communities.

It is the policy, legal and regulatory framework, that remains the single most persistent obstacle. It should not be so. There is worldwide experience today of legislating and regulating community media from which we can see what works and what does not.

In the last few years we have seen countries as diverse as Argentina, Bolivia, Uganda, India, Republic of Korea and the United Kingdom, adopting reforms that assist community media.

The common characteristics of best practice can be quickly identified.

First, there should be clear and explicit recognition of community broadcasting as a distinct sector. The distinct character of community broadcasting can be summarized as follows: It should not be run for profit but for social gain and community benefit; it should be owned by and accountable to the community that it seeks to serve; and it should provide for participation by the community in programme making and in management.

Second, there should be a straightforward and transparent process for the allocation of spectrum and the licensing of community broadcasting. It should be responsive to demand

from community-based organizations that meet the essential characteristics; there should be no unnecessary obstacles that would exclude or deter communities from seeking authorization; and the process should be independent of political interference.

Third, the regulatory framework for community broadcasting should have regard to the sustainability and resourcing of the sector. Licence fees should be set at a nominal level so as not to 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.

\*\*

Mr Chairman

Eighteen months ago, UN agencies and leading NGO specialists in the field of communications for development, gathered in Rome for the Ninth United Nations Round Table on Communications for Development. In their final Declaration they stated as follows:

“Governments should implement a legal and supportive framework favouring the right to free expression and the emergence of free and pluralistic information systems, including the recognition of the specific and crucial role of community media in providing access to communication for isolated and marginalised groups.”

Similar statements have been made at other times by UNESCO, UNDP, the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organisation. It is the responsibility of multilateral instruments such as the International Programme for the Development of Communication and the Information for All Programme to assist in turning such words into tangible and concerted action.

Thank you for listening.

*Steve Buckley*  
*UNESCO, Paris*  
*22 March 2006*

Contact: [sbuckley@gn.apc.org](mailto:sbuckley@gn.apc.org)  
Further information : <http://www.amarc.org>