



Social Accountability and Public Voice through Community Radio Programming

Empowerment of the poor and social accountability have become core values of decentralization and democratization processes around the world, and are key to effective poverty reduction. Access to information and means to report and comment on issues of local interest are recognized as critical enablers for empowerment and social accountability.

Mechanisms that promote accountability on the part of public institutions (supply side in terms of horizontal accountability) as well as mechanisms that promote governments being held accountable by civil society (demand side in terms of social and vertical accountability) are both essential for achieving effective sustainable development outcomes. Most communications initiatives supported by the World Bank and other donors have focused primarily on the supply side of accountability and not on strengthening the demand side through actions that enable the poor and civil society organizations (CSOs) to create and effectively utilize spaces for public voice and community mobilization.

The poor have limited influence in the production of information and limited access to channels of communication in most countries borrowing from the World Bank. This condition is reflected in two areas: the concentration on ownership of key media institutions and asymmetric access to mediums of communication. The latter is as prevalent among members of civil society as it is among the poor. In fact, different levels of access to

power and economic resources are common among CSOs.¹

Effective development requires not only legal and regulatory frameworks enabling open and transparent public institutions, but also the informed participation of citizens and a free, diverse and competitive media making that openness and transparency possible.² In that context, strengthening local institutions for public voice and community mobilization becomes essential for the promotion of both empowerment and social accountability.

This learning note will:

- outline the objectives of the community radio initiative;
- explain how an enabling environment sets the stage for the operation of community radio stations and how, in turn, stations facilitate an enabling environment;
- discuss in greater detail the issues surrounding the operationalization of the initiative;
- and present a case study.

¹ Fowler, Alan. *Civil Society, NGOs and Social Development: Changing the Rules of the Game*. INRISD Occasional Paper G1, January 2000.

² Stiglitz, Joseph. *Transparency in Government in The Right to Tell – The Role of Mass Media in Economic Development*, World Bank Institute Development Studies, 2002.

Project Objectives

The ultimate aim of the initiative is to support social accountability and CDD approaches in Bank practice through developmentally sound community-radio programming, as well as to promote favorable regulatory and institutional arrangements for the establishment and functioning of community radio stations. Deliverables and activities include:

- identifying and documenting good practices of community radio development within and outside World Bank operations;
- contributing a toolkit module on IEC (to be produced by Development Communications);
- drafting an Operational Manual on community radio, which will offer guidance and best practice on integrating community radio initiatives in Bank operations (discussed in greater detail later);
- convening a workshop (the proceedings of which will be used to inform the Operational Manual) with expert practitioners, a small group of staff, and clients to develop basic approaches in supporting community radio stations;
- piloting the Operational Manual in countries that are supporting changes in their enabling environments for public interest radio in the context of Bank operations (discussed in greater detail later);
- re-informing the Operational Manual with lessons learned from pilots; and fostering communities of practice, training, and dissemination of good practices across the Bank.

Community Radio and the Enabling Environment

Community radio stations can be critical enablers of information, voice, and capacities for dialogue and negotiation with public authorities. The existence of a wide network of community radio stations—broadcasting sound development content, disseminating information and providing a space for debate about public issues—is an effective means for civic engagement of poor people, especially the illiterate poor. It allows for interaction, dialogue and direct community voice, as well as access to decision meetings and events.

“Lower levels of institutional development and influence tend to characterize the organizations of the poor. Local and poor people’s organizations suffer from *civic exclusion*. Many hurdles prevent these organizations from engaging in public debate and public policy implementation. Lack of access to information and voice, resources, and political leverage usually keeps the organizations of the poor away from achieving direct representation and engagement in development initiatives”³. Addressing these and other obstacles will contribute to the creation of an enabling environment for the participation of the poor in public debate and advocacy work for improved policies and decisions affecting their lives.

How does community radio impact social accountability?

In Latin America, which is populated by over one thousand radio stations, community radio is considered an important social agent promoting human rights and participation because “community and civic radio incorporates new languages, new formats, other sounds, types of music, voices. It brings other ways of talking, new relationships with listeners, ways of asking and answering questions, ways of making demands and pressuring the authorities.”⁴

The enabling environment for civic engagement can be defined as a set of interrelated conditions that foster the capacity of both NGOs and CSOs to engage in influencing public policies, strategies, and projects at both national and local level, in a sustained and effective manner. The Participation and Civic Engagement Group of the World Bank has defined three dimensions that should be taken into consideration in assessing an

³ Reuben, William. *Civic Engagement Social Accountability and Governance Crisis*. Paper presented at the ISS 50th Anniversary Conference: Globalization, Poverty and Conflict. The Hague, 2002.

⁴ “Gestión de la radio comunitaria y ciudadana.” Claudia Villamayor y Ernesto Lamas. AMARC y Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. 1998

enabling environment for civil society to engage in development and poverty reduction: the legal framework, the political and institutional provisions, and cultural characteristics in a given country. Within each dimension, five factors are essential (ARVIN):

- (i) **Association:** factors encouraging or preempting the right to freedom of association as part of a group's identity or for collective action.
- (ii) **Resources:** legal, institutional and cultural arrangements affecting the ability of CSOs to mobilize resources within the country and from abroad.
- (iii) **Voice:** conditions influencing the freedom of expression and the right to be listened, including public consent or dissent with particular policies and practices.
- (iv) **Information:** functioning of the media and other venues of communications, as well as public access to information.
- (v) **Negotiation:** creation or expansion of public spaces for citizens to negotiate with other stakeholders, especially with the state.

Community radio stations can be seen as both beneficiaries and benefactors of an enabling environment. They are beneficiaries in the sense that without an enabling legal and regulatory framework they would either not exist, or at most carry on limited operations in an illegal environment.

As beneficiaries, these stations rely on legal frameworks that acknowledge their right to broadcast, political and governmental environments that refrain from hindering their content, and cultural mores that support voice as a fundamental right.

As benefactors, these stations facilitate access to information, association, and voice. Communities may utilize them as a means of participating in public discourse, organizing themselves behind shared causes, and benefiting from knowledge sharing.

Case study: East Timor

The Bank has recently supported community radio through a component in East Timor's *Community Empowerment and Local Governance Project (CEP)*. Some important lessons learned include:

- Establishing ownership of the community radio station among the local population upon the very inception of the endeavor. Because ownership includes many actors (CSOs, local government, broadcast media, etc) participating in a wide range of activities (training, procurement, etc), substantial time should be allotted to this stage of the process.
- Recognizing the impact of Bank procurement policies. These policies were not written with small equipment purchases in mind, and can delay project progression.
- Establishing credibility in the realm of grassroots media, especially community radio, among local and international experts and practitioners.
- Developing contents and building capacity in objective but diverse reporting. As donors have focused in the past on funding equipment purchases, technical capacity building has quickly surfaced as the number one priority community radio stations.

Operationalizing the Community Radio Initiative

Given that the Bank does not have a comparative advantage in implementing community radio project components, special care must be taken to integrate both internal and external expertise into the design and implementation phases of the project. As previously mentioned, two objectives of the initiative are to create an Operational Manual and to pilot this manual in countries with a substantial infrastructure and knowledge base in community radio.

In order to keep up with the stated goal of incorporating as much expertise as possible into the project, the Operational Manual will be written and informed by a select group of community radio practitioners, highly experienced Bank staff, and experts on grassroots media in general. An *External Advisory Committee on Civic Engagement, Empowerment, and Respect for Diversity*, which first met in July 2001, will reconvene in April 2003, to review progress of a six-topic program of which the community radio work program agreement is a part. This committee includes Soulé Issiaka (Director for Africa, Radio Netherlands), Stephen Buckley (International Vice-President of AMARC⁵), and Alfonso Gumucio (Communications Consultant) among others.

Research for potential pilot countries is currently being carried out. All pilots will be subject to needs assessments that will gauge the level of capacity building and technical assistance required in terms of human capital and content development, equipment needed, and community/stakeholder interest and buy-in (including citizens, local CSOs, local government officials, etc.).

Potential Impact

The Community Radio Initiative provides the Bank with an opportunity to integrate a project component that simultaneously promotes community mobilization, voice, and access to information.

If implemented properly, the benefits of the initiative would stretch beyond developing knowledge resources and communities of practice around community radio for Bank and external use; it would also promote community integration and cooperation in the pursuit of shared social development goals, and supplement community-driven development and social accountability in borrowing countries. In addition, it presents the Bank with a valuable entry point into the broader development arena of community empowerment through grassroots media.

⁵ Association of Community Radio Broadcasters

What is the role of community radio stations in advancing social development?

AMARC members see community radios “as an integral part of the community in which they participate. As media, they develop pluralistic and participatory communication that is open to the need for expression of the social and cultural sectors with less access to exclusively commercial media.”⁶ While promoting development and people’s empowerment, community radios “adhere to the principles of democracy and participation.”⁷ Lastly, “community radio programming is designed by the community, to improve social conditions and the quality of its cultural life. The community itself decides what its priorities and needs are in terms of information provision.” However, in some countries, national (or state-owned) radios are engaged in public interest programming and broadcasting. They may also play important roles in the broadcasting of development content.

⁶ *Federación Argentina de Radios Comunitarias, FARCO. Argentina.*

⁷ *TAMBULI - Communication Project. Philippines*