Alternative Airwaves
for Agriculture

by Nina Somera

The emergence of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) has spawned a new era in creating information and shaping communications. But issues of availability, accessibility and affordability have hounded ICTs' penetration into the most local levels, where so many promises of development have been made in the name of computers, internet and other novel electronic gadgets. They alone would not be able to alleviate people from poverty.

Amplifying Voices with a Small Recorder.
Sharon Bhagwan Rolls conducts an interview in a community for FemLINK Pacific's 89.2 FM community radio.

Photo courtesy of FemLINK Pacific

But there is more beyond the continuing digital divide which is narrowly defined as the disparity between those who have access to new ICTs and those who have none. And there is more in access beyond availability and affordability. Knowing how to use and access a technology makes more sense than owning one. Similarly, new is not necessarily better but betterment hinges on the strategic use of appropriate technologies.

Community radio is one such appropriate and strategic technology that can mitigate the so-called digital divide and contribute in spurring much needed responses especially in a time of crisis. Grounded on the people's right to communicate as well as a communitarian spirit, community radio facilitates people's creation of information that matters to them. Although it requires an investment on equipment, setting up an

FM community radio is relatively inexpensive especially in light of its immense contribution to a community's confidence and development.

Communicating Communities

The current food crisis is one opportunity to strengthen the case for community radios. In the recent research of Isis International in five Asia-Pacific countries, People's Communications for Development (PC4D), radio was cited as the most accessible for grassroots women of all communication tools which include both traditional and new ICTs. In India, one grassroots woman noted the convenience of listening to the radio without having to drop her other tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In Fiji, radio was also considered as the most accessible given its wide coverage especially as the country consists of islands.

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As the study noted: "Radio ranked first as the top effective tool for most countries (Philippines, 59%; Thailand, 33%; Fiji, 67%; Papua New Guinea, 67%) except in India, where it is the second (24%) most effective tool. In the Philippines, radio is seen as effective because the information broadcast over the radio has a very high probability of immediately reaching its target communities, particularly the grassroots women, and it also does not interfere with the grassroots women's activities. In Thailand, the community radio is seen as effective because

aside from disseminating news, it can promote culture through the playing of local songs and story-telling. In Fiji, radio is the most effective tool in their interactions with grassroots women, mainly because many grassroots women have access and listen to it. Some radio sessions are particularly effective because they allow women to share their thoughts on issues. In Papua New Guinea, radio is accessible and can cover a huge area and reaches remote places."

Community radio is perfect for remote farming communities even in places where communications infrastructure leaves much to be desired. FemLINK Pacific, a feminist communications organisation has been running a community radio station in Fiji for years and has also been active in monitoring the national implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 or women's equal participation in peace-building.

As Sharon Bhagwan Rolls of FemLINK Pacific shared: "With the community radio that operates from our community media centre as well as when it is taken out to the rural communities through the suitcase radio, we have noted the high response to food security. This, given the number of women returning to subsistence farming to be able to support their families and the fear of not being able to have sufficient food and nutrition for a healthy and productive life for her and her family."

FemLINK Pacific has been operating a suitcase radio, which can be brought outside the station to record and broadcast programmes straight from any location. The organisation has been producing programmes which feature potential responses by small stakeholders to the food crisis. As Bhagwan Rolls explained, "We have been able to let women speak about food security and how they can maintain a healthy lifestyle with having their very own backyard garden."

"The programmes pursue two aims: to improve knowledge on techniques in increasing food production and raising income levels and to guarantee stable and enhanced levels of food security in terms of accessibility, availability and better quality of food resources," she added.

Similarly a community radio in Yogyakarta served the interests of fisherfolks. Dina Listiorini of Atma Jaya Radio, an independent media organisation in Indonesia remarked, "They aired the price of fish, the weather and navy useful information for the traditional fisherfolk who comprise majority of people living around the beach."

Meanwhile a community radio in West Java also launched a programme which discusses the aspects of organic farming and the traditional herbal medicines. Listiorini, however, lamented that the programme has been run by men alone.

Important and Immediate Information

Community radio can also operate with a sense of immediacy, producing reports which listeners need urgently. These include weather reports, which when delivered timely, can spare communities from the destruction of typhoons or other weather conditions. They can also help prepare both farmers and fisherfolks in marketing their produce, providing them information on current prices in different markets.

As Farjana Akter of Voices Bangladesh pointed out, "Farmers can easily get information throughout the year in different phases and processes in their cultivation. They can be informed of the latest technologies, from seeds to harvesting methods. They can also be informed ahead about the storms, cyclones and floods, so that they can cut their harvest before nature sweeps it all."

More importantly, community radio can be an effective tool in advocating issues around food security and campaigning for alternatives. Often the impact of low supply and high prices of products are most felt at the local levels, including communities which could have had the capacity to farm and fish food resources. "Community radio can play a vital role to fight against food insecurity and to protect the biodiversity-based agriculture," Farjana added.

Community radio is likewise a platform that can link communities to policy makers who are usually at the city centres. Live broadcasts can transcend the distance between the centre, where most power-holders are located and the periphery, where majority of stakeholders live and depend on for their sustenance. Community radio thus enhances democracy.

As Akter cited, "Community radio can be handy in forest and marine-based livelihood especially in low-income countries which have lower budgets in agriculture and communications."

Compromising Communication Classification

Given these capacities and potentials of community radio, it is ironic that community radio has been perhaps the most ignored in the development of media policies. In most countries especially in the developing South, community radios are unsupported by public funds. Worse, they are even deemed illegal especially in countries where media can only be either public or private.

Public media are government-owned and controlled. Its contents are usually in line with the agenda of the government, without devoting as much airtime for otherwise dissenting views. It is also likely that such media can be a tool for propaganda especially during election campaign seasons.
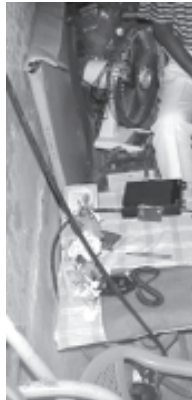
Ham Radio for Farming.
The Commonwealth of Learning (COL)-sponored ham radio in India featured farmins information such as alternative livelihoods for subsistence farmers and technological breakthroughs which can increase yields.

Photo taken from COL.

Private media can respond to this one-sided tendency of public media. However, its contents are likewise limited by their commercial interests. As profit-driven private media pays high license fees to broadcast, it is forced to offset such cost through advertisements. Hence what they broadcast is based on what is marketable. News hardly pays as much as entertainment. As there is hardly any profit in programmes for poor farmers, advertisers would not be interested to place their ad in programmes on agriculture and agrarian reform.

Meanwhile community radio is designed not only to broadcast information specifically for the community but to be independent in its content. Thus most community radios have clear ethical guidelines with regard to advertisements, to guarantee their independence. Conflict of interest may happen when a community radio that supports alternative farming airs the plugs of a food conglomerate that has agro-business subsidiaries that affect the livelihood of small farmers in the community.

Farming Frequencies

To ensure the independence of reports and the diversity of information, independent media such as community radios must be institutionalised by improving policies on media ownership, particularly the recognition of community media as a third media category. As the PC4D study concluded, "Based on feminist development paradigms, policies should take into account the three types of mass media ownership: (1) private, (2) public, and (3) community. As such, policies should be geared towards the creation of an enabling environment to ensure public service and community access to mass media systems and structures."

While comparatively little capital is needed in establishing a community radio station and sustaining its operations, for many community radios, their legal recognition

from the government is a bold step. In countries such as Nepal and the Philippines, where governments only recognise public and private media, community radios need to pay the same amount of license fees levied on commercial radios.

In the Philippines, the awarding of licenses even requires a legislative franchise or the approval of Congress. Such exorbitant cost can only be translated to exorbitant air time fees. It is for this reason that the radio programmes of non-profit organisations on commercial stations are scheduled during unforgiving hours, when airtime costs are relatively lower.

But community radios are generally cheaper to build and operate. It is powered by basic communications equipment and infrastructure: mixer, speakers, microphones and tape recorders for interviews outside the station. But one critical public good remains hard to reach for many community radio stations around the world and in some cases, is a subject of political propaganda and bribery: frequency spectrum.

The ionosphere or the higher layer of the atmosphere contains a range of frequencies. Every radio station in the same geographical area must have its own frequency, otherwise signals will cancel out each other and what we will hear are garbled programmes. Through time, radio stations have taken higher and higher frequencies within the ionosphere. In other words, the frequency spectrum is a finite resource that must be managed equitably. It is just fair to reserve some for the use of independent civil society media at a low cost.

As Bhagwan Rolls asserted, "License fees for community radios should be different from other broadcasting license that are more business and profit oriented, so as not to exclude communities with few resources. There should also be no unnecessary obstacles that would deter communities

from seeking authorisation, whose process must be independent of political interference."

Securing Freedom of Speech, Securing Food Security

Yet the existence of community radios and the allocation of frequencies to independent media are not enough. These must be guaranteed in the spirit of communication rights.

In the Khoun district of Laos, a community radio is successfully airing programmes on farming, health and other important issues. But there are critical observations such as the truckloads of timber daily heading towards the Vietnamese borders, which need to be articulated at the very least. Unfortunately, there are no clear media guidelines that media practitioners are at a loss about which materials may be broadcast and which may not. China likewise provides press freedom yet it also exercises censorship, whose bounds remain undefined. As one observer put it, "You don't know where the ceiling is until you hit it."

Community radio can function at its best in an environment that affirms free speech. By meeting such prerequisite, a community radio becomes more responsive in building awareness and solidarity on various issues and events including the current food crisis.

Communication rights are indeed interrelated with the right to food and other development rights. Community radios have been conceptualised based on the conditions in the communities, especially those which are far from the centres of policy-making and development-planning. They have even been thought to respond to the needs of communities which have been in the last rung of development priorities.

With the current food crisis, community radios are increasingly becoming an imperative source of information and means of communication for farming and fishing communities which have been forgotten during this era of neoliberal globalisation but are determined to face the challenges of the crisis within their own capacities. ■

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