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Abstract:

Bringing back the missing link into community radios in Sri Lanka - the voices of the community

“A radio station must involve in its community otherwise it will appear irrelevant.”- Robert MacLeish

Did the Community radio stations fail in Sri Lanka?

It's almost over two decades since Sri Lanka initially successfully tested and proved to other counterparts in South Asia the viability of community radio stations. In 1981 with the support and blessings of UNESCO and the Danish Development International Development Agency (DANIDA), the Mahaweli Community Radio station was set up by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. The subsequent local community radio stations that follow are the Kotmale and Uva community radio. The Mahaweli community radio station remained the second most important source of agricultural and health related information till the end of the decade. Towards the end of the decade however, the Mahaweli community radio station started showing off cracks in the system. At present two decades after Sri Lanka successfully pioneered the community radio stations today these radio stations are struggling to sustain in a context while battling with the profit oriented FM channels of the corporate sector.

The community radio station in Sri Lanka are not owned by communities instead by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. However, in the case of Mahaweli Community radio with US \$ 1.1 million financial strength from the donor has been a key factor in the autonomy that shielded the Mahaweli Community radio from those who opposed the system. Unfortunately, this autonomy was only till the funds lasted. In a country where broadcasting is highly politicized being able to remain out of politics can be sited as an important achievement. This achievement was possible due to the international cooperation obtained from UNESCO and DANIDA. However, there are also negative implications of having international cooperation such as over dependence of foreign funding. The gap in this system was due to not having a proper withdrawal plan for the system with the phasing out of the international cooperation. Sri Lankan Mahaweli Community radio failing to obtain long lasting support from Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation was as explained by Felix Llbero was “Asian broadcasting systems were originally organized as means of propagating government thinking and were simply designed to inform people.”

Addressing the information needs of community's amidst difficult situations

In Sri Lanka, the country that pioneered the community radio service in the south Asia region to date, does not hear of any civil society movement or educational institution attempting to set up or even lobby for ownership of air waves. However, even amidst constraints faced the regional services such as Yal FM in the north and community radio services such as Uva and Kotmale Community radio attempts to bring in the communities voices and cater to their unmet development needs.

A perfect illustration of this is what is known as 'The E-tuktuk Project, Kotmale'. The Kothmale Community Radio & Multimedia Centre located in the hill country dotted with small farms and tea plantations, serves a population of 200,000 and boasts a radio channel and a computer centre among others. As a result of this mobile service many things are now possible. Telemedicine, an English teaching programme and emergency communications are among the many benefits that remote communities can now avail themselves of. However, many are prevented from utilising it because of its relative remoteness or gender, ethnicity and caste considerations.

The regional service in the civil war affected Jaffna peninsula although operates from the army camp base has been of immense help to students sitting for their ordinary level examination in 2006 who could not access tuition or even could attend school by broadcasting educational programmes.

Getting the voices of the communities back

In Sri Lanka the right to broadcast remained with the state extended arm the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation until 1993. From 1993 onwards there is a rapid increase of the FM radio channels initiated by the local corporate sector. The only radio station that is not owned by the corporate sector or the state is the controversial voice of the Tamil Tigers –the radio channel operated by the separatist group in the North of the country.

The lack of attention by the elected governments to improve the services and infrastructure of these radio services, the competition created by the FM services owned by the corporate sector, politicized nature of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation who has total control over the transmitters are the key reasons that hinder the progress of the community radio service in Sri Lanka. The work of the Telecommunication Regulatory Commission which serves as the sole authority to manage disbursement of radio frequencies, and therefore controls television, radio and digital microwave radio networking has also come in for some criticism and calls for more democratic and transparent processes of decision-making. Several applications for the setting up of community radio stations have not yet received approval. In spite of a range of public opinion that the state-owned electronic media should be transformed into public service broadcasting units, at the moment there is no public debate or campaign on this issue. In this context it is more than necessary to set up a movement to bring in the voices of the communities to the development discourse.

The first step towards this should be an investigation of the current situation in relation to community radio policy and the legal framework, listener ship of community radio stations, content of programmes, the contribution by the civil society etc At the same time all key actors and pioneers of the community radio movement should be brought to a common platform to share their

ideas and experiences to revive the community radio movement in Sri Lanka. Along with this process there should be awareness building using print and electronic media about the importance of community radio.