Community Radio in Africa - yesterday, today and tomorrow

The ideal is that stations are community owned structures, in many instances the voices of the communities as well as the interface, facilitating the flow of local development information in a participatory manner providing quality programming through local partnerships. The latter partnership ideally should be between community structures, civil society organisations etc.

Historically Community Radio was always a platform for facilitating social change addressing issues of local development through interacting with its local audiences. In most instances the community Radio sector was initiated through the advocacy and lobby efforts of civil society organizations towards empowering communities with a vehicle to exercise their democratic right to communicate. Activists, passionate about civil rights education and local upliftment were always a key component to the development of the community radio sector in Africa. In many African countries we have the same experience and the sectors’ efforts to engage stakeholders such as the government and donors alike, is precisely to ensure the principle of the Right to Communicate and freedom of expression as defined within Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Allow me to recall “the 1991 Windhoek Declaration” promoting an independent and pluralistic African press; We also recall “the 2001 African Charter on Broadcasting; and “the 2001 SADC ICT Declaration”;

The latter declarations reaffirms the importance of an enabling legal framework; an independent regulator to promote the development of free, independent and pluralistic media in Africa; It also affirms the need to introduce and manage essential information and communication technologies for community-centred socio-economic development, i.e. the equitable distribution of the scarce resources of frequencies in the public interest and in so doing providing access to the communities to exercise their right to communicate.

Community Radio Today

- Amarc Africa has grown in the past few years doubling its membership from 700 to 1200 members. So I cannot complain. However as we celebrate this growth there is a very real danger in the erosion of the very principles that community radio is built upon.

- The past two decades has seen several technological advances with far reaching impact, specifically when one look at issues of access through cell phones and internet. In Africa the advent of the convergence of technologies had most significant and a far reaching impact.

- Radio as an ICT platform has found creative ways of utilizing technology in extending its reach and meeting the ever evolving communication needs of its diverse local audiences. Examples like solar powered radio stations and receivers, interacting radio with growing social networking platforms, live streaming and mobile or cell phone interactive platforms in Ghana and Tanzania to give farmers access to crucial market information etc.

- The community radio sector has steadily increased in number in countries such as Namibie, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and Mauritius is on the brink of growth. Initiatives exist in Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Angola, Botswana, Swaziland and a few other countries within SADC.
In East Africa the sector organized them into a sub regional structure and had several successful activities in past year. West Africa and central is seeing resurgence decide several challenges.

- The biggest challenge however is to develop the capacity of community media and civil society groups to engage Governments and Regional structures in order lobby and advocate for the implementation of the principles of freedom of expression and the right to communicate as stated in the Windhoek Declaration.

**Community Radio Tomorrow**

- The recent and current global economic situation has also highlighted funding challenges; and in the future a controlled state subsidy of community radio will be key, as these stations play a critical role in providing platforms for public participation in achieving participatory governance objectives. The latter scenario is becoming more apparent as donor support is dwindling and migrates to different countries leaving serious challenges to the sustainability of the sector in the affected countries. The Media development and Diversity Agency is a best practice of how this can be employed in a controlled environment with core focus on public interest imperatives.

- With the occurrences and impact of climate change and natural disasters on the rise, Community radio will play an increasingly key role in facilitating Social change, assisting communities to adapt current practices as well as becoming sources of critical emergency support information.

- With the increase of poverty, the community radio sector will have to engage in partnering with social entrepreneurial initiatives in providing alternatives that focuses on community owned economic development, such as local markets and local manufacturing industries and services.

- The challenge will be to provide synchronized resource and capacity support to community radio stations and community radio networks/ associations to enable it to protect its editorial independence.

- AMARC , now more than ever before have a critical role to play in ensuring leadership in socio political and socio economic vision that will protect the innocence of the global sector.

**Basic Principles and Challenges of Community Radio For Development**

- To increase effectiveness of communities through CR in achieving Millennium Development Goals;

- Recognize *voicelessness and powerlessness as key dimensions of poverty*;

- Address the contribution of CR to accountability, equity and civil rights;

- Ensure the full and effective participation of women; Be participatory and inclusive of marginalized groups;
• The lack of proper enabling legislation is the single principal barrier to CR broadcasters in Africa. The absence of a friendly legislation; the existence of media oppression and threats are a generalized barrier to the development of community radio throughout the world today.

• On varying degrees, these factors hinder CR capacity to develop its positive impact in giving voice to the marginalized, in developing inclusive and democratic societies where governments are accountable and people are empowered to achieve development objectives.

• Likewise, the absence of appropriate legislation recognizing the social contribution of CR, creates sustainability challenges that hinder the possibility for scaling up good models of sustainable CR.

• Community radio is a distinct media sector and a vital alternative to state owned public broadcaster and commercial private media.

• Communities have sought in community radio a means to express their own issues, concerns, cultures and languages. The expansion of CR is the result of the reduction of diversity of voices that accompany the formation of media conglomerates that is a fore runner of the globalization processes.

• Community Radio Sustainability is a global challenge. In spite of increasing positive experiences of socially sustainable CR, financial and technological sustainability remain a challenge that often distract CR practitioners from dedicating themselves to ameliorate radio production, increase community participation and pertinence of programming.

• Community radio faces important sustainability challenges regarding capacity building, and in enhancing local ownership.

• Knowledge sharing on best experiences across regions as well as increased use of new ICTs can make a difference.

• Community Radio Networks and knowledge sharing are weak. Even though community radio has become a global sector, interaction and exchange between regions is weak and systematic impact assessment within regions is rare.

• A multifaceted challenge for community radio is the need to strengthen its own country and regional networks and communications.

• There is a need to embed appropriate assessment tools, to document and disseminate good practice and to strengthen network development through institutional capacity building and improved communications.

2 http://africa.amarc.org/index.php?p=amarcpublications