

## **Community Radio in Asia Pacific: Challenges and Impacts**

[Slide 1: Cover slide]

Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to be with you to talk about community radio in Asia Pacific. I would like to begin by congratulating Bario Radio for receiving the first license to operate a community radio station in Malaysia. I would also like to congratulate the Government of Malaysia for its willingness and support for starting community media in this country. The fact that the first community broadcasting license in Malaysia has been given to an indigenous community is remarkable. This is an important step forward and must be applauded as well as supported.

[Slide 2: What is AMARC?]

I represent AMARC - the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters. AMARC was established in 1983 and in the last 29 years, it has developed as a membership-based international non-governmental organization whose core purpose is to defend and promote community broadcasting. AMARC is both a grassroots activist network and an international institution recognized by the United Nations system. It has over 5,000 members in more than 113 countries.

I will present an overview of community radios along with some of the main challenges and impacts of the sector in the Asia Pacific region. I will touch upon some background and talk about activities essential for the development of the sector.

### **Evolution of community radio:**

[Slide 3: Why Community Radio?]

Community broadcasting evolved through social movements as community-based organisations sought a way to express their own issues, concerns, cultures and languages. It sought to create an alternative to the state-owned public broadcaster and the private commercial media or simply fill in the information gap created by the absence of any other source of information in local communities. 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. The growth of community broadcasting - as an independent media sector with social and not commercial objectives - is intimately linked to the emergence of new social movements.

Community radios as we see in the world today draw inspiration from the rich history of community broadcasting in Latin America that dates back to the Bolivian miner's radios of the late 1940s as well as from the early experiences of community broadcasting in North America, Europe and Australia.

[Slide 4]

Today there are more than 100 countries where some form of community broadcasting exists. However, many States remain reluctant to open airwaves to civil society organisations. At the same time and despite their enthusiasm for free market, private commercial broadcasters have also frequently sought to exclude not-for-profit community broadcasters from competing in the media landscape. Country level

legislative and regulatory frameworks and associated spectrum planning remain the most persistent barriers to the establishment and growth of community broadcasting.

[Slide 5]

In the 1980s, community radios emerged in the Philippines and spread to several South East Asian countries and beyond. Countries like Nepal and Indonesia are considered places of rapid growth in community broadcasting. In Indonesia the airwaves opened up after the fall of the Suharto regime and today there are hundreds of small community radio stations across the Indonesian islands, serving peasants, fishing communities and the neighbourhoods of the urban poor. Wherever it has been established it has become clear that community broadcasting can play a specific and crucial role in encouraging public participation, facilitating community-level debate, providing access to information, strengthening cultural and linguistic diversity, and giving voice to poor and otherwise marginalized groups.

[Slide 6: Testimonial of a community member from Nepal]

Community radio is the most effective communication tool when it comes to assisting people in poor communities in agriculture, education, health services, infrastructure building, community forestry, environmental conservation, natural disaster preparedness, empowering the marginalised, and establishing good governance.

[Slide 7: Community voices- impact identity]

Community radio reaches into the homes of the poorest of the poor. It is effective in helping seriously disadvantaged communities share vital information and build strategies so that they will be able to begin to address their problems effectively. Community radio can help localise the information and message and has a direct bearing over the economic growth of communities. Information received from the local radio transformed into knowledge directly enhances productivity, outreach to markets, and profitability. Community radio is an essential tool in helping communities everywhere to achieve poverty reduction and other Millennium Development Goals.

Community radio puts the tools of communications into the hands of people in hundreds of communities so that they can create their own means of cultural expression, news and information, dialogue and development. It empowers them to change their social and economic standards, improve transparency in public sector, hold governments and corporations to account and become more effectively involved in the democratic development of their community and country. Community radio responds to the information needs of the community. it operates on the principle of 'by the people, for the people and of the people' and is not for making profit

Literacy is not a pre condition for community broadcasting. Use of local language by a community radio closes the information gap and grants a community specific identity. It has the ability to mobilize volunteers and thereby make cost effective use of infrastructure. Community radio is an inclusive medium involving men and women as well as children and elderly which most mainstream media neglect

### **Community Radio in Asia Pacific region:**

With this background, I will now briefly present a picture of community radio in the Asia Pacific region, the challenges that confront the sector and impacts that have led to its

sustained growth. Some prominent countries in the region with positive examples of community broadcasting are:

Australia is a pioneer in the region. It has excellent examples of promoting rights, issues and concerns of indigenous people through community radio and has a vibrant community radio sector;

[Slide 8: Community Radios in Asia-Pacific]

Fiji and several Pacific Island countries too have good examples of community radios like the suitcase radio initiative in Fiji and the award winning New Dawn FM in Papua New Guinea. Suitcase radio is a concept popularized in the Pacific by FemLINKPACIFIC, a women's NGO. It involves community members, especially women in running community broadcasting in far flung areas of the country. Suitcase radio is literally radio station in a suitcase – containing a studio and a transmission centre – carried from village to village for demonstration and test transmissions.

[Slide 9: Community Radios in Asia-Pacific]

Indonesia and Thailand have vibrant but not so well organised sectors of community broadcasting. There are hundreds if not more community radios operating in different parts of these countries. There are more than one sector associations. Due to unfriendly and inadequate legal provisions, community radios in both countries operate under unclear and uncertain atmosphere and are constantly harassed by law enforcing agencies. Thailand has in recent days has taken initiative to regularise the sector. However, efforts are still at infancy and there are several differing viewpoints on how to go about it. In both countries and especially in Indonesia, community broadcasting has played a vital role in enhancing natural disaster preparedness of communities. Some of the best examples of how community radios can play an important role before and after natural disasters come from Yogyakarta and Aceh in Indonesia. The FMYY community radio station in Japan is another good example of community broadcasting in Asia. It is a radio for the migrant community run by members of that community. Unfortunately, Radio FMYY is currently facing a problem regarding its broadcasting license and has launched a national lobbying and advocacy campaign to urge the government to change the broadcasting regulations in Japan. Japan and Indonesia are countries that exemplify how community radio acts an emergency radio and play a major role in post disaster and reconstruction & rehabilitation stages.

In East Timor community radios played an important role in the country's independence and now has focuses on conflict resolution, reconciliation and peace building.

[Slide 10: Community Radios in Asia-Pacific]

In South Asia, Nepal was the first to begin community broadcasting. Radio Sagarmatha was established in 1997 and since then Nepal has seen a rapid rise in the numbers of community radio stations. There are close to 200 community radios spread across the length and breadth of the country. Unfortunately, Nepal does not yet have a community radio policy and its community broadcasters are governed mostly through the same policies, acts and laws that govern all other broadcasters in the country.

[Slide 11: Community Radios in Asia-Pacific]

In 2006, India became the first country in South Asia to introduce a community radio policy fulfilling one of the key conditions for the development of the sector. In December

2010, the Government of India ratified a recommendation to start a community radio support fund.

[Slide 12: Community Radios in Asia-Pacific]

However, the Indian community radio policy places serious obstacles over the free operation of the sector. The policy limits the right to produce and broadcast news and current affairs content. It also places limitation over the transmission power of community radio stations. These provisions are considered unfriendly and inappropriate by community radio practitioners worldwide. Availability of bandwidth for community broadcasting is emerging as another key challenge in India. According to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting of India, 113 community radios are operation in that country. Bangladesh, the only other country to have a community radio policy has 14 community radio stations that are gearing up to go on air soon.

[Slide 13: Community Radios in Asia-Pacific]

The fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan led to the opening of the media environment, which in turn paved path for starting community broadcasting. There are about 100 FM Stations in Afghanistan out of which 36 are community based and six are known as women's station. The concept of community radio is fairly new Afghanistan. Though a media law was adopted in 2009, no provision was made for community radio.

[Slide 14: Community Radios in Asia-Pacific – Sketch of a radio]

Community radios in one of the first countries in Asia to start community broadcasting – the Philippines is under serious threat. In the last few years, Philippines has become one of the most dangerous countries for media workers. Dozens of community radio broadcasters have been murdered in the last 12 months alone by individuals and groups that feel threatened by the existence of free and independent media in the communities. The prevailing atmosphere of impunity has further deteriorated the conditions. AMARC is organising a freedom of expression mission to Philippines involving a large number of human rights and freedom of expression institutions and individuals. The mission will make field visits to places community radios that have been attacked, meet local freedom of expression groups as well as other stakeholders including government authorities. The mission will publish a set of recommendations for improving the condition and a set of follow-up activities

Developed countries of Asia Pacific such as China, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea, have limited or no form of community broadcasting. In South Asia countries like Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka do not allow independent community broadcasting. In fact the number of countries that have some form of community broadcasting are outweighed by those that do not and that needs to change.

Policies, laws and regulation alone are not sufficient on their own. Frameworks set by the governments must not pose unfair and unnecessary constraints. Recognition of community broadcasting in law and regulation must be accompanied by reservation of radio frequencies for this sector without excessive limitations placed on transmission power, content format & design, or other technical parameters.

The procedures for awarding and regulating of broadcasting licenses and frequencies for community broadcasting should be simple and easy to follow, fair, open and transparent, efficient, and under the administrative responsibility of an independent regulatory body. Community broadcasters should have access to a diversity of funding

sources without unreasonable restrictions. This may include public funds administered in such a way that it does not compromise their independence.

This is the general image of community broadcasting in Asia Pacific, pictured from a macro level. I will not briefly touch upon some of the key challenges confronting community radio stations in Asia and the Pacific region.

### **Some of the major challenges facing Community Radios in Asia Pacific**

[Slide 15: Challenges for Community Broadcasting]

The convergence of telecommunications and broadcasting and the emergence of new digital forms of production and distribution are having a profound effect on community broadcasting and its possibilities. Community broadcasters themselves have begun to exploit the new technologies to enhance their communications capacity. Internet has become a tool for the exchange of programmes, for accessing news services and information, for self promotion and a means to organise and to build the community broadcasting movement. The combination of community broadcasting with digital production and Internet access has brought new opportunities and approaches to community media that have contributed to sustainability and enlargement of the services provided. Mobile telephone has become the preferred tool of community-based correspondents sending their reports from the field and broadcasting live from events as they happen.

At the same time, community broadcasters are increasingly facing challenges to demonstrate the public good that may be derived from the interfacing of the traditional practices with new media platforms and technologies. In addition to challenges of social and economic sustainability, the challenge to be able to voice critical and alternative perspectives and not to be assimilated to government agendas or the marketplace is increasingly growing.

Raising awareness about community radio among disadvantaged communities, building capacity to establish and sustain community radio services and supporting the development of a network of community radio stakeholders are definitely areas that need to be addressed urgently.

To build the capacity of local community-based organizations in socially and economically disadvantaged communities to establish and sustain their own community radio stations is another area that needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.

Providing local training workshops in community radio development, providing mentoring support and guidance, undertaking progress monitoring and evaluation of community radio initiatives, and supporting an annual capacity building and demonstrator event at the national level are some of the ways by which capacity at local levels can be enhanced.

Lastly, a very important area of work is to improve the enabling environment for community radio development through the development of an effective community radio network and associated services and support. This can be addressed by providing training and mentoring support for the existing network, by assisting in the development of communication mechanisms, by assisting with briefing papers and interventions on

matters of policy and regulation, and supporting the development of a national community radio training centre.

## **Conclusion**

[Slide 16: Community Radio]

Radio being the most widespread and accessible communication medium, community broadcasting has infinite potential in Asia Pacific region. It will contribute to sustainable development, improve human rights, will aid reduction of poverty and enhance livelihoods of people in socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The miracles of community broadcasting, in terms of improved human rights for disadvantaged people by contributing to their capability to exercise their right to the freedom of expression and access to information are just waiting to happen in most of Asia.

The challenges facing the community radio sector in the Asia Pacific region will be resolved provided community broadcasters focus single-mindedly on their social purpose - to empower communities to speak for themselves, to give a voice to the voiceless and to be a force for social and economic good.

As community broadcasting gains mainstream recognition it must be able to demonstrate its real social impact and significance - its contribution to culture, education, good governance and citizen's participation.

Before I conclude, please allow me thank the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, IFAD and Bario for organising this dialogue. I am sure this dialogue and recommendations received in this forum will have longstanding and positive consequences on the growth of the community radio sector in the country and in the region.

Thank you very much.

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