

Recommendations of the National Consultation on “Strengthening Community Radio” held in New Delhi on April 11 & 12, 2017 at UNESCO New Delhi

A two-day national consultation on strengthening community radio in India was organized by the UNESCO Chair on Community Media and UNESCO New Delhi on April 11 and 12, 2017. The Consultation was facilitated by the presentation of six working papers written by small groups constituted for the purpose on the following themes: Inclusivity, Capacity Building, Sustainability, Technology, Research, Documentation & Evaluation, and Policy. The Consultation was attended by representatives of operational community radio stations, CR networks, advocates, capacity-building organizations, academic institutions, and the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.

After detailed deliberations, participants endorsed the following set of recommendations, arranged thematically, towards the strengthening of the community radio sector in India. (*Within each theme, the recommendations have been presented separately for the government and the CR sector, with some repeated under both.*)

Inclusivity, Equity, and Diversity

For the CR Sector

- Community radio must build associations with social movements such as Right to Information, Food Security and Sovereignty, Education, and Disability Rights etc. These associations will help amplify diverse issues, perspectives, and voices from the perspectives of a range of movements. These will in turn reaffirm the right to communication, collectivisation of voices, and create active citizenship.
- Community radios need to also look at newer forms of cultural diversity within the community that include lifestyle changes, social equations among peers, and different modes of representations and artistic expressions.
- The term ‘community’ is a contested concept and its manifestation on ground is very complex. Efforts must be made by the CR stakeholders to develop a more nuanced understanding of ‘community’ as heterogeneous and dynamic. They must be sensitive to the internal power structures of a community that make it difficult for everyone to participate equally and for all perspectives to be represented.
- AMARC gender guidelines and other documents related to gender-sensitive programming must be included in all capacity sharing efforts to sensitise the radio

station staff, volunteers as well as management about the need for democratic communication and diversity. Internal policies of CR stations must adopt codes and practices that ensure gender equity and inclusion.

For the Government

- The CR policy must make provisions for pro-active licensing in conflict prone areas and regions under-served by media. Efforts must be made to encourage spaces and opportunities for democratic deliberations and collective action on issues that affect the lives of the communities who are at the receiving end of development.
- There must be provision in the policy for issuing of emergency and mobile community radio licenses to facilitate disaster mitigation, prevention, management, and relief measures.
- The government should provide support for organising capacity building workshops that sensitise CR stations on the principles, processes and practices to encourage Inclusivity, Equity and Diversity.

Capacity Building

For the CR Sector

- **Stakeholders** that fund initiatives in the sector (e.g. CEMCA, UNICEF, UNESCO) could share their specific interests and thrust areas, along with outlay if possible, with MIB/Consortium to help fine-tune plans.
- Promote a **multi-sectoral** approach to training by engaging cross-media experts on issues such as gender, environment, and health, and those with expertise in theatre, folk arts, and other media to introduce creative and lateral thinking for innovative programming.
- Consolidate all the training material and make them available in the Creative Commons. Training guides to help utilise the materials effectively may also be considered, along with translation rights and support.
- **The different practitioner agencies** could forge partnerships for a common minimum training agenda and help with identifying training needs.
- **Operating CRSs**, without depending exclusively on organised training events by stakeholders and the MIB, should imbibe a training culture and conduct periodic trainings locally and regionally.
- They can help build a cadre of Master Trainers from among themselves from each State/linguistic zone that would be helpful in providing cost effective, quick, short-term and refresher training.
- CRSs must initiate a culture within their stations, whereby, any person who has attended a training programme must share the ideas, learning, materials with a larger group comprising CRS staff and community contributors.

- There ought to be post-training handholding to promote leadership and decision making capabilities.

For the Government

- **The MIB** could create an umbrella body such as a Consortium (not in the brick and mortar sense) of agencies and organizations to better coordinate different capacity building activities for the sector.
- List and update agencies with the capacity to provide training.
- Create a dynamic database of experts/individual consultants with a facility for end users to provide feedback.
- Develop a training calendar for different types of institutions, regions and linguistic zones.
- Promote a **multi-sectoral** approach to training by engaging cross-media experts on issues such as gender, environment, and health, and those with expertise in theatre, folk arts, and other media to introduce creative and lateral thinking for innovative programming.
- Consolidate all the training material and make them available in the Creative Commons. Training guides to help utilise the materials effectively may also be considered, along with translation rights and support.

Sustainability

For the CR Sector

- Going beyond the emphasis on CR as a development tool, and re-imagining CR within the paradigm of Right to Communication, to be read implicitly within Article (19)(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution, guaranteeing citizens the right to freedom of speech and expression.
- Establish core funding for CR stations so that basic operational costs are covered, leaving CRs free to concentrate on content development.
- Facilitate physical and online information and best practice exchanges and further peer visits for learning with specified deliverables and outputs.

For the Government

- Establishing consultations specific to CR sustainability and sharing of best practices (national, regional and global), as well as the documentation and sharing of such innovative practices.
- Revisions in regulatory frameworks to allow identification of the CRS as a functionally independent institution with a distinct identity that is separate from its parent institution.

- Establishment of processes to mandate community ownership of the decision-making and management of the CRS from the start of the licensing period, rather than mandating a handover point much later in the history of the CRS.
- Specifically mandating social audits of community radio stations at regular intervals, and developing capacity building processes for beginning CR stations on establishing such processes for their CRs.
- Relax content restrictions on community radio, and permit free collection and broadcast of local news and information over CRs.
- Expand and institutionalize (as in the form of a Consortium) capacity building processes for the CR sector, with sustainability specific components that encourage innovative solutions to different aspects of sustainability.
- Expand CR technology sustainability capacity building, as well as technology related training as a specific stream of training.
- Streamline payments from DAVP to CR stations, but establish limits for government sourced advertising and sponsorship revenue to CRs and stakeholder organisations/CR sectoral associations, to ensure independence and funding diversity.
- Facilitate physical and online information and best practice exchanges and further peer visits for learning with specified deliverables and outputs.
- Design and notify a community-friendly handover process of the CR license that respects the basic tenets of community ownership and management of the CR.
- Redesign and re-establish the CR Support Fund as an autonomous sectoral fund with government and stakeholder participation, as well as supportive regulatory frameworks for CR technology localization and lowered tariff and excise regimes.
- Advocacy with other line ministries (MHA, MoCIT) to streamline and conform contrary legislation like FCRA 2010 (which has some provisions that are antithetical to entities involved in media activity), and reduce potential friction points that challenge CR policy.

Technology

For the Government

- Simplification of the application process for both SACFA and Frequency Allocation has been a long pending demand. This needs to be implemented immediately.
- An exclusive and efficient help-desk at WPC is the need of the hour. Several applicants have noted that WPC is unresponsive to queries on SACFA and frequency allocation issues.
- There needs to be a systematic, rational and dynamic mapping of the spectrum both in urban and rural areas. This is important so that we do not lose sight of the principles of equity and social justice in allocation of spectrum.
- Transmission licenses of 20W and below need to be 'light licensed'/ delicensed.
- Establishing a specific capacity building programme for CR technology and technological processes within the larger process of CR capacity building, especially as supported with CR Support Fund.

- Revitalizing the technology innovation support under the CR Support Scheme (MIB called for applications a couple of years ago and did nothing).
- There is an urgent need for eliminating import duties on CR equipment in order to further bring down the costs of setting up a CR station. Both MIB and MoCIT need to work with the relevant ministries to bring this into effect. This includes fully built equipment units; assemblage packages for transmitters, and, components of CR equipment that are not manufactured in India.
- The Ministry of I&B needs to codify under what conditions the increased wattage of up to 250 ERP will be provided. These conditions should be carefully considered, given that spectrum is scarce and urban areas and often underutilised in rural areas.
- On funding of technology, the recommended standards are too stringent and hardly dynamic to take cognizance of the pace at which appropriate and durable technology is evolving.
- Subsidies should also be extended to CR stations wanting to embrace convergence.
- The introduction of convergent technologies raises issues in terms of dealing with the communities. Numbers alone cannot be the parameter for participation of communities. The depth of engagement must also be considered.
- Any attempt to digitalise community radio should take place through a thorough consultative process. While accounting for learnings from other countries, a clear timeline should be laid out before any policy level decisions are announced for the CR sector.

Research, Documentation, Evaluation

For the CR Sector

- There must be processes put in place for exchange visits among CR stations to encourage horizontal learning. Existing platforms for sharing, learning, and collaboration must be sustained and strengthened.
- Capacity-building efforts must be put in place for developing research and documentation skills within CR stations.
- The sector must work towards a CR Consortium which should adopt a code of ethics that would reflect the core non-negotiable principles of the CR sector in India.
- Research, Assessment and Evaluation methodologies for the CR sector must be distinct and different from those adopted by mainstream media and must be in keeping with the core participatory principles and philosophy of community radio.

For the Government

- Capacity-building efforts must be put in place for developing research and documentation skills within CR stations.

- Self-Assessment and Peer Review exercises must be facilitated and encouraged as a tool for co-learning and continuous improvement.
- The government should support research and documentation in the CR sector, and when such studies are commissioned, the findings must be shared with various stakeholders and their implications discussed in a transparent manner.
- Research, Assessment and Evaluation methodologies for the CR sector must be distinct and different from those adopted by mainstream media and must be in keeping with the core participatory principles and philosophy of community radio.
- Systematic processes must be put in place such that documentation, research and evaluation informs policy-making and support for the CR sector.

CR Policy

For the Government

Licensing

- Expansion of ownership to a range of registered, non-governmental bodies that could workers' organizations (not affiliated to political parties) and cooperatives, with a demonstrable commitment to community service.
- Apart from public educational institutions, other government agencies and departments should be disallowed from setting up and running CR. This is in keeping with the true spirit of community radios, which are run and managed by communities.
- Catering to geographical diversity and topography of the region, CRs should be allowed, on a case-to-case basis, to go beyond the prescribed 100-watt ERP, especially in difficult terrain and higher altitudes.
- Integrated and speedy licensing of CR applications, including clearances from MoCIT, should be implemented, to enhance the effectiveness of the single-window mechanism.
- Licensing should prioritise states that do not yet have an operational community radio, and cater to regions that are underserved by the media.
- A separate nation-wide frequency for emergency and disaster situations must be allocated. Additionally, proactive licensing of applications from disaster-prone regions should be made high-priority.
- Constitution of the Screening Committee and its functioning should be made more transparent and genuinely representative, democratic, and inclusive. Reasons for rejection of applications by the Committee should also be made available on a public platform.

Content

- Keeping in line with international norms that permit airing of local news on CRs, broadcast of independently produced news and current affairs should be allowed on

community radio in India. If required, FCRA norms may be revisited to enable CR stations to broadcast news and current affairs programming.

- Suitable provisions should be made in the Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) policy to protect communities against commercial exploitation of local cultural resources aired on CRs, and to encourage local cultural programming.

Funding and Monitoring

- An independent regulatory body, with clear checks and balances, should be set up to address violations of programming guidelines by CR stations.
- Provision of public funding of CR, as it exists today, should be reconceptualised to allow the setting up of an autonomous public body for decision-making on fund disbursement.
- Advertising, sponsorship and any other government funding for CRs should be made transparent.
- As part of Digital India, high speed broadband should be provided by Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL) to every CR station. This could also address the government’s concern about not being able to monitor FM broadcasts.
- As part of Digital India, telecom companies should exempt CRs engaged in online audio streaming from incurring data charges.

Spectrum and Technology

- The procurement of transmitters and other broadcasting equipment should be made easier, exempting CRs from incurring excise duties and other levies on import.
- Explore ‘lighter’ licensing (de-licensing) procedures for low-power FM stations, say of around 20 W power.
- Take a more cautious and deliberate move towards digitalization of broadcasting, especially in community radio.
- Undertake a systematic spectrum mapping of the country and place it in the public domain, so that a more rational and realistic view can be taken of availability of frequencies in certain parts of the country.

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