



STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RADIO IN INDIA

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CR SUSTAINABILITY

By

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It has now been more than a decade after the Government of India issued the revised CR policy guidelines in 2006. As of November 2016, there were 200 operational CR stations across the countryⁱ, of which more than 150 were over two years oldⁱⁱ, and approximately one-third were over five years old (2016 estimation). Simultaneously, the last few years have also seen several interventions examining sustainability related considerations, including efforts to create self-assessment methodologies and practices on a variety of parameters; and studies that have examined correlations between various factors contributing to the setup and continued operation of vibrant, community-owned and community-responsive CR stations ⁱⁱⁱ. Arguably, there is now enough on-ground experience of running community radio stations, as well as adequate data emerging from these studies for an informed discussion of the factors contributing to sustainability of community radio.

Concepts & definitions of sustainability

Before we move on to a detailed discussion of the factors contributing to CR sustainability, it is instructive to revisit how the concept of sustainability has been defined in the past.

In a broader sense, Lisa Cannon in her book, *Life Beyond Aid* defines sustainability as “...the ability of an organization to secure and manage sufficient resources to enable it to fulfil its mission effectively and consistently over time without excessive dependence on a single funding source. Sustainable organizations have, at a minimum, a clear mission and strategic direction; the skills to attract resources from a variety of local, national and international sources; and the knowhow to manage them effectively.”^{iv}

Community media proponent Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron, defining sustainability specifically in the context of community multimedia centers^v, examines sustainability from the point of view of three inter-related concepts:

- **Social sustainability** – community ownership of the station, and the level of participation by community members in the decision-making, design, production and airing of content;
- **Institutional sustainability** – the development of transparent, democratic, and verifiable internal processes and management practices by the station (affected also by external factors such as policies and regulations, licensing, and enabling laws);
- **Financial sustainability** – the ability of the CRS to generate revenue and funding in order to carry out its mission and process, as well as its ability to establish transparent processes on how its income is used and accounted for (also impacted by external

processes like community involvement – involved communities are more likely to ensure that the station has enough funds – and a regulatory environment that provides for methods by which CRs can raise funds)

AMARC, in its 2007 study of the social impact of community radio^{vi}, links the sustainability of local CRs to its capacity to have relevant participatory and creative programming in its listener communities' own language; as also to the availability of financial support and technological support so that community radio practitioners are not distracted from the process of radio production.

UNESCO, as part of its support to the media development project in Mozambique^{vii}, identifies four key factors to ensure sustainability and minimize the vulnerability of CR stations:

- **Strong community ownership;**
- **Effective training and capacitation** of the community to run, manage and maintain the station;
- **The creation of a technical management system** that allows the station to select and use locally maintainable, repairable equipment that is geared to local conditions

It is worth noting that all too often, the word sustainability itself is confused with the idea of financial sustainability alone. As Dagrón points out, financial stability is inherently dependent on the value the community places on the community radio station (social sustainability) as well as the station's ability to establish stable procedures, processes and management practices that define its own existence and gives it a distinct identity in the minds of its community members (institutional sustainability).

With this review of the concept in mind, this paper now moves on to assess the current status of CR in India on the basis of these parameters, and enunciate some of the challenges these entail.

Social sustainability: Notes

The core of social sustainability is the creation of community ownership and identification of the community with the purpose of the station. In this sense, several stations across the country have successfully managed to create dedicated listener-audiences for their programmes. *Radio Active* in Bengaluru, Karnataka, has managed to create a distinct activist identity for itself, with content designed and managed by listener groups as diverse as LGBTQs, auto drivers and ragpickers. Similarly, *Gurgaon ki Awaaz* in Gurgaon, Haryana, has high recognition among both local communities displaced by

urbanization, as well as migrant communities that have settled in the area. Unfortunately, stations with such a distinct identity continue to remain a minority within the larger population of CR stations. A considerable number continue to be indistinguishable from the public broadcaster (All India Radio) in tone, approach and content; or (at the other extreme) from the commercial stations in their emphasis on film music and specialist radio jockeys.

Engagement, participation & decision-making

Part of the problem lies with how the station's communities engage physically with the CRS itself. The housing of CR in India within NGOs, educational institutions and agricultural organizations like Krishi Vigyan Kendras continues to create **access problems** that prevent an easy inflow of community members into the CRS. Additionally, the parent institution's HR processes also often obstruct the active incorporation of community members into active decision-making and content development roles. Where it is present to a greater extent, community participation in the CRS has come because it has surmounted these restrictions; rather than due to an environment which has facilitated it.

To some extent, the couching of community radio within the social development paradigm rather than a freedom of speech and expression paradigm contributes to this top-down approach to the station's purpose – the station being 'for' the community, rather than 'by' the community. It is typified by the NGO or the educational institution trying to do 'outreach', rather than standing back and letting their communities drive the agenda.

By extension, though several stations have established Community Management Committees, or Content Management Committees, after prompting by donors or capacity building organizations, the innate hesitation of the parent institution to dilute its role in decision-making often cripples the committee, staffing it with pliant individuals who will not challenge the existing status-quo of the parent body or the local community, rather than dynamic community leaders who will take charge of the new process. The CRS is then viewed by the community as a development initiative by the parent institution, rather than an unfettered platform designed to be owned by communities. As a result, the CRS often ends up reflecting the power hierarchies of the local community, as well as that of the parent body. This is compounded by regulatory processes like the one currently extant, which offers CR licenses only to a registered parent institution, with no mechanism for community handover of the CR station: Not only does this mean the parent institution hesitates to take an anti-establishment stance through the CRS in the

interests of protecting its other activities, it also means it cannot physically transfer management to a community even if it wants to.

By virtue of this development project model, the institutions that host CR stations also typically have no experience with community evaluations of their purpose and performance, being more used to audits by donor organizations and supervisory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) than an audit of their performance by those they engage with. CR stations therefore have little experience, unless trained formally in this, to undertake social audits of their work; or community engagement events that go beyond publicizing what they are doing. (A useful comparison in this respect would be the *jan manch-es* conducted by activist organizations like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan in the lead up to the Right to Information Act, 2005.)

Social sustainability as linked to content

The development mindset has also resulted in a reversal of the typical content structure of local radio: Where it would typically be driven by live programming, which gives listeners a continuous way to engage with the station and generates a large amount of airtime, it is mostly driven by produced content (which results in comparatively less). This is partly on account of the scientific-technical nature of development content, which demands technical expertise and (sometimes) technical verification of the subject matter of the programme. It is also partially a skill-deficiency issue, since most stations are still to be trained in, or have not evolved, efficient ways in which to handle live programming, which requires practice, timing and the ability to ‘wing it’ even while respecting the overall thrust and duration of the programme.

Monitoring and content regulation processes also play a part, as stations are hesitant to put content which they have not already vetted on air – a constant threat with live programming where community members may talk without due cognizance of the AIR content code and guidelines. The recent notices issued to some CR stations for alleged infringements of the content code have had a further cooling effect on live content, which is now seen as potentially threatening the station’s continued operation and inviting unwanted attention from government monitors.

Another aspect of the content that limits the level of engagement is restrictions on news content. Coverage of local events (including on politics and governance issues) entitlements and rights, and the inflow of information from outside the immediate community, all play key roles in CR stations becoming the go-to source for local

information for the community. Official restrictions on news broadcast over CR, however, continue – and anachronism in an era where news travels quickly over the internet and WhatsApp. Clarifying what need not be categorized as news in the local context is, at best, a partial solution – since this necessarily restricts the station from engaging the listener audience at all its potential levels of interest. To truly speak of a responsive, community-owned CRS, we have to accept that what is acceptable and relevant on the CRS has to be decided by its listeners, rather than an external authority, which – at best – could provide an adjudicatory dispute resolution function if the station’s content is challenged in some fashion.

Additionally, the politics of a media channel has everything to do with its identity as an institution and as a platform for ideas. By crippling the ability of the station to select issues of consequence to its politics and perspective – not commenting on politics, for instance, or participate in democratic debate on which representative to select for the area – the regulatory framework robs the station of its ability to build an identity, which has consequences for its financial and social sustainability.

Volunteerism

In the absence of easy mechanisms to engage with their listeners, and structures that sometimes actively obstruct participation, CR stations in India often fall back on paid staff, or on professionally trained production teams, taking them ever further from the implicit idea of broad-based participation that should underpin their processes.

While it is readily evident that volunteerism models from the developed world, where individuals do not have to sacrifice their subsistence to participate in community processes, cannot work in rural Indian contexts, it would also be mistaken to assume that volunteerism per se is not appropriate.

One possible mechanism is to prepare and build the capacity of steadily larger numbers of community members of all ages, genders and socio-economic strata, so that this larger pool can contribute less time per capita – and thereby not sacrifice other aspects of their lives – but still maintain a high level of community engagement with the station. This requires both a structured training process by the CRS, as well as the ability to direct and coordinate outputs from this larger pool of individuals. It also means trusting the volunteer with station equipment and decision-making. Such a mechanism could eventually dispense with all but the most basic full-time coordination staff, which would increase community participation, while minimizing financial outgo on paying salaries.

An important consideration in this respect is the linkages the CR station finds with other grassroots movements and institutions in the area, and how much it is able to foreground their priorities in its content and process. Grassroots rights-based movements typically need an outlet for their perspectives and ideas, and such a partnership builds powerful social links and a social purpose for the CRS which contributes to its identity and clarity on what it stands for.

Affirmative action & redressing social imbalances

The modern understanding of CR places it squarely within the discourse of voice, and the important role it plays as a purely oral yet relatively simple technological medium in empowering those without voice. Yet, CR in India is yet to reflect adequately on how it will privilege the most marginalized, protect the most disadvantaged, and foreground those who cannot be heard at all. All too often, by reflecting existing power hierarchies in an attempt to get a more general buy-in from those who are more powerful (and therefore potentially more disruptive), the station sacrifices its chance to be identified as a platform primarily for the weaker sections of the community: An important consideration in getting social purchase would be to be identified as the preferred medium for those at the bottom of the pyramid, rather than currying favour with those at the top, who – more often than not – will have access to other media.

Mechanisms to address this would be to work with community members to develop gender policies, diversity policies and a statement of dedication to affirmative action for the underprivileged (especially women, children and migrant communities), that can provide a point of reference for the station itself, as well as serve as an evaluation parameter of its performance. (Also see ***Decision-making, review, feedback & reflection below***)

Institutional sustainability: Notes

Social sustainability is only possible when the station's purpose, outcomes and outputs are visible for everyone to see and reflect on – which automatically requires us to think about the components that make the station a free-standing institution, with a distinct identity and purpose.

Vision & Mission

A challenge faced by several Indian CR stations is the gradual loss of identity as successive waves of new individuals are incorporated into the station team over time. The dilution of the original group, present when the identity of the station was being defined – and often the beneficiaries of the initial injection of capacity building that the station may have received – means the purpose of the station gradually ebbs away. As described by Dagon and Toby Mendel, articulating a clear purpose and objective for the CRS right at the start is a good way to lay the ground for the station to continually evaluate its purpose and its direction as time goes by – and educate those who are new to its process on its *raison d'être*. Part of this process is also an examination of WHAT the station intends to sustain, and WHY it wants to sustain it, which will allow it to define a code of ethics and a charter of behaviour for itself – both important steps on the road to defining a unique identity for it. As we have already seen, this also means defining the station's political stance, the sections of society it stands for, and its perspective of matters of local, regional and national importance.

As a logical extension of this point, it is also important for the station to explore with its community (and its peers) whether they have a shared understanding of concepts such as participation and community ownership of the station, so that (a) there are no crossed wires that lead to mismatches in expectations and objectives; and (b) if there are differences, reach a negotiated midpoint of understanding that works for everyone.

Deciding process for decision making, review, feedback & reflection

Once a vision and mission are decided, the CR station as an institution only becomes sustainable if it has clearly codified transparent rules and systems that foreground the community's primacy in decision making, and in deciding the processes it will follow to establish and run itself.

In this sense, the station will have to negotiate and publicly announce its structure for how it will allow its listeners to participate in its planning processes and in its creation of content; how it will incorporate and train interested members of the community in its technological processes and with the requisite understanding of the skills of developing content; how it will decide its mix of content; how it will obtain listener and community feedback on its content and its performance as a community platform; how it will earn its revenue and spend it (and the processes it will adopt to make this accessible to anyone who wants to examine this); and finally, how it will internally evaluate its own performance, and that of the people participating in it (especially if the latter are paid to any degree by the CRS).

Another important component of this would be for the station to publicly define how it will document and record its practices and learnings, and make course corrections in content or in processes as it moves forward.

Finally, in a fast-changing media landscape, and faced by a continuously evolving pantheon of media outlets, options and technologies, the station must define how it will innovate in the face of changing media use, content preferences and social mores to refresh its content and practices. It must also establish a structure for how it intends to explore ways to capitalize on new technology and ICTs with the potential to increase its community engagement and reach out to larger audiences.

Institutionalizing capacity building & seeking external inputs

Few CR stations across the country have had the benefit of sustained capacity building on any aspect of the CRS's work. The few which have had this – usually as part of extended donor support for establishment of their stations – have struggled to institutionalize the knowledge and skills that the initial group of trainees learnt.

Over the last 10 years, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has supported more than 70 awareness generation workshops to encourage the setup of CRS. Under the CR Support Fund Scheme that was set up in 2012, with inputs from sectoral stakeholders, the Fund was also expected to dedicate funds to sectoral capacity building on a variety of themes and skills. However, despite planning for this under the Fund, five years later, capacity building continues to be done by individual sectoral stakeholder organizations, which develop support from donor agencies to conduct training processes. Some organizations have also supported the creation of formalized teaching materials and curricula on community radio (IGNOU) and community radio technology (CEMCA). More recently, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting has announced the setup of a CR training institute under the aegis of the Indian Institute of Mass Communications (IIMC), but the details for this are as yet unclear.

What is clear is that the sector needs to setup, coordinate and build a holistic capacity building process that can build the capacity of CR stations in technical skills, content development, management and technology. Such a process could be developed as a contributory process, with different CR capacity building institutions taking up different aspects of the training based on their preferences and strengths. Ideally, this process would be envisioned as a long-term engagement, with regular repetitions of short and

long term courses, and refreshers and advanced courses for those wanting to further brush up skills.

Simultaneously, in the interests of building a strong institution, CR stations must seek guidance from their peers as well as from other processes and organizations about areas on which they could build their skills and understanding. This should be codified into a training plan, that support both their internal process of incorporating fresh community trainees into their stations, as well as the cross-learning of other methodologies for production, and the ability to work with new technologies. This is, of course, predicated on the availability of a ‘menu-card’, for want of a better word, of choices for capacity building – something that the sector would do well to develop so that individual CRSs (or groups of them) can decide on the kind of inputs they require, as many of them may be unfamiliar even with the palette of inputs that go into building a successful CR station. (Also see *Technological sustainability*, below.) Online platforms built by sector stakeholders, and designed for training and sharing can also play a key role in the exploration^{viii}, as well as for the capacity building process itself.

A significant methodology for capacity building that has been experimented with by the Ministry, but which deserves to be implemented with clearer deliverables and outputs from participating CR stations, is the **peer review exercise**, where stations visited each other to understand from each other, and provide feedback on each other’s processes.

Licensing & regulatory structures that support community ownership

As we have seen previously, at this point in time, the CR policy guidelines allow only a specified set of institutions to apply for CR licenses, and do not suggest a clearcut methodology for handing an established station over to the community it addresses. A process to design such a handover has been in discussion for nearly a decade, and has not made much headway except to suggest that the successor organization must also qualify independently as a similarly structured and registered organization. This defeats the basic idea of community ownership and access to the CR station, since the new entity will be subject to the same challenges that the previous one was/is.

There is therefore a strong case to re-examine a structure for community handover of the CRS after a specified period of time, which explores alternate structures for community handover, as well as alternate entities who could receive the transferred license.

Financial sustainability: Notes

As previously noted, financial sustainability – in the sense of the CRS being able to earn enough by way of revenue and grant funds to sustain both its current operations and expenses, as well as allow for future increases and expansions – is a product of the station’s social and institutional sustainability, rather than the other way around. Communities tend to jointly invest in things they value and feel for; and a strong sense of community ownership tends to support steady contributions to the CRS.

Similarly, having a clear-cut link with other grassroots movements tends to support a sense of belonging to the platform, and thereby contributions in cash and kind. Lastly, an unambiguous identity tends to reassure contributors – whether community or donor agencies – about the purpose and stance of the CRS, bringing in contributions.

Within this, research and feedback from CR stations highlights some key issues that must be kept in mind.

The importance of diversity of funding & revenue

Multiple sources of funding keep the station from becoming over-dependent on a single source – and thereby beholden to the source of those funds. Having multiple sources allows the station to concentrate on its primary vision and its production and community engagement, rather than worrying about the eventuality of that single source of revenue failing or withdrawing its funding at some point. At the same time, continuously exploring new sources of revenue and ways to build revenue streams keeps the CRS on its toes and active, rather than settling into a lull of assured funding.

Correlation of parent institution’s financial strength & CRS sustainability

In the Indian context, CR stations are set up by parent institutions (NGOS, educational institutions, KVKs). Studies reveal that the financial strength of the parent body is positively correlated with the financial sustainability of the CRS – a financially strong parent institution virtually guarantees that the CRS will have no financial issues – but is negatively correlated with the station’s ownership by community and its independence. Strong parent bodies tend to stamp their authority over the CRS, and dictate its functioning. Financially strong parent institutions also tend to be reluctant to hand over greater ownership to communities, and tend to treat their CRS as projects. This obstructs the construction of an independent financial identity for the CRS, and - by extension – transparency regarding the CRS’s financials, since they are inextricably mixed up with the parent bodies’ financial records.

Regulatory & policy processes that impact revenues and funds flow

Development sector funding carries its own challenges. Not only is it usually oriented around project activities rather than institution building, it works around project cycles and timelines, usually limiting such funding to shorter time period and specific deliverables. As a result, funding sourced from government grants and donor agencies – unless specifically designed to support the building of the CRS – tend to keep shifting the purpose and thematic focus of the CRS. Stations work not on the basis of thematic priorities established by their communities, but by what the current flavour-of-the-season is in development circles: HIV, sanitation, skill building and so on.

At the same time, regulatory processes like the Foreign Contribution Regulatory Act 2010 specify that NGOs registered under the act cannot run media processes - with foreign grant funds or otherwise. This not only excludes many well-regarded NGOs from applying for licenses (for fear of losing their FCRA registrations), but is a Damocles' Sword over the heads of those who applied before the current act was promulgated.

Finally, not-for-profit accounting regulations prevent many NGOs and educational institutions from creating a separate financial identity for their CR stations – a separate bank account in its own distinct name, for example – by virtue of the license being in the name of the parent body.

The discourse of purely community contributed financial sustainability

There is a school of thought that suggests that community radio stations must be supported fully by community contributions in cash and kind to be regarded as community radio at all, with no donor funding or external support at all.

While such a Utopian ideal sound excellent in principle – everyone wants their institutions to be financially independent - there are three points to be raised here:

- a. If community radio is to truly be a third layer of media, designed to express and give space for community voices and alternate perspectives (as opposed to commercial and public sector media), is it not the duty of the state to actively contribute to the upkeep of the CR stations, in order to espouse the diversity they represent?
- b. Can the poor and the marginalized, whom the CR stations are primarily expected to serve, contribute enough for the station to be revenue neutral?
- c. Under current financial regimes, on what basis does one quantify in-kind contributions made by community in terms of official reporting?

It should be evident that there is a strong case to be made for no-strings-attached state funding and support to the CR sector, for the establishment and running of CR stations, as well as their training, and development of content.

Redesigning the CR Support Fund

As we have seen earlier in this paper, there is a strong case for state support to the CR sector and individual stations in order to support their very existence as an alternate medium.

The Community Radio Support Fund was originally envisioned for precisely this purpose by the sector stakeholders who examined similar models globally before arriving at a design. (*Disclosure: One of the authors of this paper was one of those individuals.*) In its avatar as a Ministry supported scheme, however, it has arguably not been able to fulfill this mandate in any significant way: It has not only not managed to expend funds to the different streams of expenditure that were originally envisioned, it has also not been able to evolve an autonomous stakeholder and sector-managed process. Set up as an autonomous (but accountable) body, it would have provided greater transparency and responsiveness of decision-making, faster disbursement of funds, and more sectoral impact in a shorter period. There is therefore a strong case to be made for a revised approach to the CR Support Fund, to be developed as an autonomous sectoral institution, as originally imagined. Such a design would also allow line ministries and donor agencies to contribute to sectoral growth without holding CR stations to project timelines and the vagaries of development funding, by contributing funds to a general pool to be used equitably for the growth of the sector.

Social audit of financials and financial decision making

As in other decision-making within the station, not being able to be financially transparent has consequences for its community's sense of ownership of the station. It is therefore important for the CRS to establish processes for the regular declaration of the station's income and expenditure details to its community members; as well as its process of decision-making on remuneration to paid staff; collection of community contributions and expenses on capital costs (equipment, infrastructure). This could be through annual or six-monthly community meetings, where these details can be placed before community members; or through other processes like publicly accessible records (wall paintings, documents displayed at the CRS, etc.)

However, we have already seen the difficulties faced by the current regulatory and licensing structure, which is not supportive of such structures.

Advertising, sponsorship & content development support

The current CR policy allows the CRS to accept seven minutes per broadcast hour of advertising (recently raised from five minutes per broadcast hour); and accept sponsored programmes from government sources (ministries, government departments) at a specific rate (the minimum rate on this has recently been removed). It also allows for the empanelment of CRS with the Directorate of Advertising & Visual Publicity (DAVP), the government's advertising and publicity department, to receive government generated content and advertising. CR stations are also supported by donor agencies to develop content on various thematic areas, though they are not allowed to accept sponsorships from private entities or companies.

The government also provides funding support to sectoral organizations to conduct awareness building activities on CR on its behalf, as well as organize events related to the community radio sector.

Studies on revenue generated from these sources indicate that for some stations, and for some sectoral organizations, these sources – especially government sources - constitute a disproportionately large part of their income and revenue streams. This calls into question their ability to diversify their revenue streams in the interest of maintaining their independence. Additionally, the government is the largest generator of social sector communication spending in the country; and there is a case to be made for preventing the sector from being awash in government messaging, in the interests of preserving CR's character as an alternate medium.

It is therefore worth considering whether funding from any one source – especially government sources – needs to be capped at a threshold that prevents that source from dominating the CR station's agenda. Such a threshold could be the theme of a sectoral consultation, inputs for which could come from community consultations by individual stations. Additionally, a number of CR stations see advertising exclusively through the lens of commercial advertising as seen on television or commercial channels; and only consider corporate product and service advertisements to be of consequence. While these may result in higher revenues, the reality is that such sources of advertising prefer media that have larger outreach, and CR stations, as a result manage to sell only a fraction of the advertising time they have each day.

It should be understood that advertising in a CR station is extremely local in nature, and ranges from simple classifieds to local announcements by community members. In keeping with the local community prioritized character of the CRS, stations should be

encouraged to explore such sources for local advertising revenue, so that they use their advertising time more efficiently.

There is also a case for streamlining revenues payable by DAVP to CR stations on account of Government-distributed advertising and content, which is often hugely delayed, and requires complex paperwork and follow-up on the part of the CRS with DAVP's Delhi-based offices.

Technological sustainability: Notes

One of the factors identified in UNESCO's study of community radio in Mozambique was the importance of technological sustainability. Radio is a technological medium, and requires engagement with a variety of equipment – hardware and software – in order to generate content and broadcast it. Our discussion on sustainability, therefore, would be incomplete without a short discussion on this aspect of sustainability.

Technology selection & documentation at the CRS level

Typically, CR stations make very little effort to learn about the technology aspects of the CRS, preferring to be guided by others, or making equipment selections based on what suppliers offer. This is partly because of a lack of skills and information at the local level, and also because of a culture of techno-fear that has permeated our society.

In order to ensure sustainable decision-making on technology for the CRS, decisions need to be taken on the basis of four key factors:

- **Low cost:** Equipment needs to be adequate to the purpose, and must suit the function; there is no point in buying very expensive specialist equipment unless the users' technical skills are up to using the specialist equipment. Additionally, equipment quality vs the price is not a linear scale: There is plenty of equipment available at low and intermediate price points that are perfectly suited for the purposes of a CRS.
- **Modularity:** Equipment combinations must be planned for modularity, such that the failure of a specific piece of equipment should not bring the whole process to a grinding halt. Modular structures allow individual pieces of equipment to be replaced at convenient moments, without disturbing the overall setup – and for the reconfiguration of setups to suit specific requirements.
- **Redundancy:** One of the large challenges faced by CR stations is the poor equipment service support, since many stations are located in extremely remote areas, far away from authorized service centers. Thus, it makes sense to plan for additional units of every

piece of equipment – budget permitting – so that replacement and spare units are available for every piece of equipment.

- **Locally renewable & repairable:** Where studio acoustic treatments and insulation are concerned, it makes better sense to explore low cost, local solutions for anechoic (without echo) materials – bamboo mats, for instance, or egg trays – rather than explore options that need specialists and high installation costs. Similarly, exploring equipment that has more accessible repair and maintenance facilities is better value for money.

It is also important to maintain paperwork and documentation for technology – especially with regard to warranties and repair records. Both allow more efficient use of equipment, by maximizing manufacturer support and minimizing repair costs.

Establishing partnerships with local repair service and AMC providers

Once basic warranties are over, it is worth exploring the skills and local facilities available for repair and maintenance of equipment. Few realize that a local radio and TV repair shop possess the basic skills to repair a transmitter or a computer with some guidance. CR stations would do well to carry out an assessment of such skills available locally, to be supported if necessary by facilitating specialist training by a manufacturer or capacity building organization. Common equipment like UPSs and air conditioners, especially, are easily repaired at a local level, with many local dealers and suppliers happy to even undertake servicing and Annual Maintenance Contracts (AMCs).

Establishing preventive maintenance procedures

A dusty country, with wide variations in temperature, is always going to be stressful on equipment. But a large proportion of everyday breakdowns can be addressed by simply establishing preventive checkups for equipment. Regular dusting, and simple techniques like leaving shoes outside studio floors, or installing a high-grade electrical earthing, goes a long way to keeping equipment in good working order. Establishing a checking and cleaning routine for all equipment, as well as a culture of care and personal responsibility for the equipment as a community asset are key steps.

Technology specific capacity building & information sharing networks

Within the larger picture of capacity building for the CR sector, technology training – especially installation, maintenance and repair training – often get short shrift. Trainings often focus on recording and editing skills, or on content development skills. But there is a distinct need for technology-specific training processes; and the development of processes that can specifically support this. Recent examples of such technology-specific training, such as the UNESCO IPDC-supported technology training workshop series

conducted by some stakeholder organizations in 2012-13, endorse the need to develop templates, training materials, and training processes that emphasize these skills.

On a related note, it is important to establish trustworthy peer-review and recommendation networks for equipment, so that CR stations can receive real world reviews of equipment in field situations. Dealers tend to recommend equipment that gives them profit-margins. CR stations supporting each other by co-creating dynamic lists of useful and hardy equipment that address different price-points and geographies would go a long way to fixing the problem of acquiring appropriate equipment. Such processes can also be online, over platforms that support such sharing processes.

Supportive regulatory frameworks for CR technology

While the working paper on CR technology takes up some of the regulatory issues surrounding technology for community radio, it is still instructive to briefly look at a few steps to improve regulatory and funding support for CR technology:

- **Reduced tariffs and costs on CR equipment:** The specific exemption of CR related equipment from various kinds of taxes and duties would result in considerable savings for CR stations in terms of capital investment. This would require a concerted advocacy effort by the Ministry of I&B, which manages the CR policy, with the Finance Ministry as well as the Ministry of Commerce, as well as the Department for Customs and Excise.
- **Revised equipment specifications for support by the CR Support Fund:** The CR Support Fund provides technology grants to CR stations for the purchase of equipment. This has recently been revised upwards from 50% to a maximum of 90% for stations based in Jammu & Kashmir and the North East of India, and 75% for the rest of India on a maximum cost of INR 15 lakhs. However, the equipment specifications finalized sharply reduce the options for purchase, limiting the possibilities to only a few brands and models – and thereby impacting the key philosophies that should guide the purchase of hardy and robust equipment for CR stations enunciated above.
- **Advocacy for expanding local manufacture of audio equipment:** It is an unfortunate fact that the majority of high quality audio equipment is still manufactured outside India, leading to high import costs and levies that push up their prices sharply. At the same time, local expertise for repair of such equipment is also limited to the large metros, and comes at premium cost. This would suggest that investments in building local manufacturing capacity for audio equipment of decent quality would greatly assist the expansion of the sector, and result in reduction of costs. This would also work well under flagship schemes like Make in India promulgated by the current administration.

Recommendations:

This paper has already suggested broad directions that need to be explored in order to improve sustainability outcomes for community radio. However, for convenience, some key actionable recommendations are listed below:

- 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;
- 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;
- Specifically mandating social audits of community radio stations at regular intervals, and developing capacity building processes for incipient CR stations on establishing such processes for their CRs;
- Relaxing content restrictions on community radio, and permitting free collection and broadcast of local news and information over CRs;
- Expand and institutionalize 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;
- Establish core funding for CR stations so that basic operational costs are covered, leaving CRs free to concentrate on content development;
- 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 respect 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, and reduce potential friction points that challenge CR policy.

ⁱ MoIB “CR Status at a glance as on 01.11.2016”, available on mib.nic.in website

ⁱⁱ Estimation based on Ministry of Information & Broadcasting inputs on date of GoPA signing & other data

ⁱⁱⁱ “Community Radio Continuous Improvement Toolkit (CRCIT)”, UNESCO Chair on Community Media, University of Hyderabad , CEMCA, 2014 ; “CR Self Assessment Guide”, Ideosync Media Combine, 2013; “Community Radio & Sustainability”, Ideosync Media Combine, CEMCA/UNESCO (2015)

^{iv} “Life Beyond Aid”, Cannon, Lisa (1999)

^v “Sustainability of Community Multimedia Centers”, Dagron, Alfonso-Gumucio & Dlamini, Hezekiel, UNESCO (2005)

^{vi} “Community Radio Social Impact Assessment: Removing Barriers, Increasing Effectiveness”, AMARC (2007)

^{vii} “Creating Sustainable Community Radio Stations – The Media Project” accessed at:

www.mediamoz.com/CR/Sustainable_cr.doc

^{viii} Namely: www.manch.net.in, set up Ideosync Media Combine; and www.edaa.in, set up One World Foundation.