

## **Art of Aerialists: Sustainability of Community Media**

**BY ALFONSO GUMUCIO-DAGRÓN \***

### **On the tightrope**

Alternative, independent and citizen's media have tried to solve sustainability puzzle for more than fifty years.

There is not a single experience of community radio broadcasting, popular theater, local television, participatory video or alternative press that has not gone by stages where lack of resources seemed to suffocate it.

The survival and development experience of community media resembles circus artists that walk on the tightrope in delicate balance. They sometimes fall on the net and they ascend to begin again. The difference is that in community media most of the time there is not a net to cushion the fall. Therefore many projects were frustrated just after they began, and so they were not able to settle down inside the community.

Only few experiences have survived without external support. Almost all of them have economic support from civil society institutions, progressive churches, international cooperation. I could verify this when I researched for my book "Making Waves: Participatory Communication for the Social Change": most of the fifty experiences depicted in the book depended at a greater or lesser extent on external contributions.

Over the years, many experiences arose and were kept as development programs components with financing of international organizations. It is the case of big projects of production and broadcast of documentary and educational videos for rural development, as PRODERITH<sup>1</sup>, CESPAC<sup>2</sup> and CESPAC<sup>3</sup> that FAO supported

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<sup>1</sup> Published by Rockefeller Foundation, 2001.

\* Note of the Translator: Spanish acronym for Programa de Desarrollo Rural Integrado del Trópico Húmedo [The Program of Integrated Rural Development in the Tropical Wetlands]

in Mexico, Peru and Mali, respectively. Another United Nations agency, UNESCO, made possible to develop community radio experiences in Haiti, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Mozambique and other Third World countries. In recent years it has committed its support to Community Multimedia Centers<sup>2</sup>, in collaboration with the International Development Research Center (IDRC) of Canada, one of the most active organizations in the field of new information and communication technologies. UNICEF supported Popular Theater in Nigeria, and Community Public Address System (ComPAS) in Philippines, among others. There would not be any community radio station in Madagascar, for example, if Swiss cooperation had not supported the creation of Radio Mampita in Fianarantsoa, in the mountainous area of the island, and Radio Magneva in Morondava, in the western coast.

Although it can seem paradoxical, some governments have even given their support to create and maintain community media. In Mexico indigenous radio stations network arose from an initiative of the Indigenous National Institute (INI). Radio Kothmale, in Sri Lanka—it is usually mentioned as a convergence example between radio and new technologies— has also the government's support, as well as Serrana Television in Cuba and Radio Kiritimati in the nation island of Kiribati, in the Pacific.

The Progressive Catholic church has played a very important role in developing community radio stations, particularly in Latin America. Since 1950s, several hundreds of community, urban and rural radio stations, have worked with institutional support of the church. One of the interesting examples is Radio Plo XII, in Bolivian mining region, was founded initially “to eradicate alcoholism and communism”; however, very soon it was on the workers' side. Radio Kwizera, that serves refugees who arrive in Tanzania escaping from the war between Tutsis and

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Note of the Translator: Spanish acronym for Centro de Servicios de Pedagogía Audiovisual para la Capacitación [Center for Audiovisual Pedagogy Services for Education]

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> Note of the Translator: French acronym for Centre de Services de Production Audiovisuelle [Center for Audiovisual Production Services]

<sup>2</sup> Community Multimedia Centers (CMC) or Multipurpose Community Telecenter (MCT). They include computers, Internet, phone, fax, radio and television services.

Hutus, is a project of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). Some of the outstanding experiences of community radio in Latin America, like Radio Enriquillo (Dominican Republic), Radio Huayacocotla (Mexico), Radio Quillabamba (Peru), or the first one of all, Radio Sutatenza (Colombia), were founded as initiatives of Catholic priests. Teatro La Fragua (Honduras), is another example of initiative led by the progressive Catholic church.

The development of local participatory communication experiences has also been possible thanks to national and international non government institutions initiative through solidarity alliances with civil society organizations. The Video project Self-Employed Women's Association SEWA (India) was born with the support of Martha Stuart Communications (New York). This same organization supported, some years later, participatory video initiatives in Nigeria (Action Health) and Egypt (Video & Community Dreams)<sup>3</sup>. Other examples of this kind are the theater group Wan Smolbag, in Vanuatu, and the group of independent video Maneno Mengi, in Tanzania.

There are relatively few experiences that come from the communities without external support. The case of mining radio stations in Bolivia is exceptional in this regard. The miners' trade union radio stations were financed for many years with contributions from workers who set aside one day salary for radio stations maintenance.

Experiences coming from a communities initiative had to ask -in different stages of their history- for external solidarity support to develop themselves. Bush Radio (South Africa) that was born secretly during the fight against the apartheid, has today the support from Dutch cooperation. Radio Izcanal (El Salvador), founded by a group of refugees who returned from Honduras, has the support from Communication Assistance Foundation (CAF), also from Holland.

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<sup>3</sup> More information about this and some other experiences in "*Haciendo Olas*" *Comunicación Participativa para el Cambio Social*" ["Making Waves: Participatory Communication for the Social Change"].

Every community communication experience is so different and particular that this attempt to grouping them according to their origin or their financing sources doesn't reflect accurately the nature of sustainability challenges.

### **Independence and sustainability**

Does it mean that experiences of community communication, citizen communication, participatory communication are not sustainable for themselves? Are we before artificially maintained projects that cannot survive without external support? How have some experiences survived throughout several decades?

There are, of course, several possible perspectives to analyze sustainability, and it would be a great mistake to reduce this analysis, only to economic factors. If an experience is sustainable in economic terms, or that has even achieved its self-financing, it doesn't guarantee that it fulfills the functions of service to its audience and of strengthening community voices.

Alternative or community citizen communication cannot exist if it is not in function of social dynamics in which it is developed. The reasons for a community communication experience is justified in the relationship established with its audience and in the process of community participation. Ultimately, it doesn't matter how the initiative has arisen, while there is a process of community appropriation that guarantees its autonomy and the independence of its political and communicative project.

Economic sustainability, is then just a factor among several others that determine sustainability of a community communication process. Other important factors are social sustainability and institutional sustainability.

Social sustainability is closely related to social actors' participation and with communicative process appropriation. Without community participation, the communication experience becomes an island amid the human universe in which it operates. Radio programming reflects the needs of that human universe and supports the community political project.

Institutional sustainability is the framework that facilitates participatory processes. On the one hand, it has to do with existing regulatory scheme, regulations and State policies, that is to say, with a favorable atmosphere so that an experience can be developed without censorship and without external pressures. On the other hand, it has to deal with procedures and human and labor relationships in the community radio, that is, internal democracy, decision-making mechanisms and management transparency.

There is not a magic formula for integral sustainability of community media. However, the three components —social, institutional and economic— should be taken into account to achieve a balance that allows not only the survival, but the development of participatory communication processes. In this paper we aim to demonstrate that without a balance among these three factors, sustainability is impossible in the medium and long term.

### **Institutional Sustainability**

The history of the last fifty years shows us that never, in the context of Third World countries, the ideal conditions have been presented, so that experiences of alternative and participatory communication can be developed. Nonetheless, It has not prevented thousands of experiences from multiplying in Latin America, Europe, North America, and more recently in Africa and Asia.

Mass media in the hands of private national and transnational companies don't approve alternative media establishment which can reduce their power. It is a problem of economic, and political order. The relationships between mass media owners and democratic or dictatorial governments of the moment have been broadly demonstrated in several studies<sup>4</sup>.

The privatization and deregulation process of radioelectric spectrum, boosted by multilateral financing organizations, has worsen a situation characterized by the concentration of media in few hands and the expansion of networks and consortia

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<sup>4</sup> In the Latin America case, "Latin Politics, Global Media", by Elizabeth Fox and Silvio Waisbord (2002) is remarkable.

beyond national frontiers. The cases of Televisa and TV Azteca in Mexico, as well as Grupo Globo and Grupo Abril in Brazil, are significant, but even in smaller countries the same tendency can be observed. Four television stations and a network of radio stations in Guatemala belong to a single person, Ángel González González, a Mexican who lives in Miami, from where he watches over other investments in media in Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

During several decades, Latin American community radio stations fought for their recognition by the State. After having been victims of military dictatorships and other authoritarian governments, they fought a long fight to have a legislation which recognized their existence and their importance as community expression media that develop social and cultural programs in favor of population. Some countries made the State establish in a legislation a differentiation between private commercial radio stations and community radio stations not pursuing lucrative, but cultural and educational goals.

As a result of that sustained effort for many years, community radio stations multiplied particularly in the Andean countries, especially in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador, and in Central America. At the end of the 90s an approximate estimate established that over five thousand community radio stations operated in the region, near two thousand in the Peruvian territory.

The privatization wave of the 90s has deeply affected the community media situation and in some countries it has meant a setback. During the 60s and 70s many Latin American governments tolerated the growth of community radio stations.

The situation has changed abruptly. Some countries, that recognized and regulated the functioning of community radio stations, today give these radio frequencies to private or multinational companies by means of public tender where the highest bidder obtains the licenses. In this way, media accumulation is favored in few hands and thousands of community radio stations with authorization to operate are left to the margin of the law. The Guatemala case is particularly

dramatic. Almost 70 local radio stations, most of them operated by Mayan native communities, have been declared illegal. Recently, a commercial spot of the commercial radio stations managers' association, made a call to the Guatemalan government “to imprison the directors of pirate radio stations, to capture its transmission equipment and to recover those frequencies.”

In countries like Bolivia or Peru, where community radio stations were firmly established, governments have not been able to silence them yet, although the permanent threats on them. On the one hand, legislation no longer protects them, or makes it only in an ambiguous way, and on the other hand, there are not State policies stimulating their development. In El Salvador, community radio stations had to compete with commercial ones to purchase the frequencies. With ARPAS<sup>5</sup> support, two FM frequencies were obtained through which about twenty community radio stations broadcast with careful distribution of their geographical coverage.

These “macro” factors have undoubtedly an enormous influence on the development of community media. In Africa, where the development of community radio stations is relatively recent, the legislation issue is varied. There are countries like South Africa and Benin whose legislation protects community radio stations, but in some other countries, legislation doesn't even establish a difference between private and community radio stations. In the upcoming years, this lack of distinction can lead to concentrate radio stations in private networks, and to sell frequencies at auction.

Regulation is even less frequent when it is about new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Despite “cyber-café” or telecenters have spread in the whole planet, only few Third World countries have adopted a legislation, and when they have, they have been guided by the interests of big manufacturers and equipment and services providers. No regulation exists to differentiate models implemented as business, particularly those “café-Internet” in urban centers, from community telecenters with information objectives for

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<sup>5</sup> Spanish acronym for Asociación de Radios y Programas Participativos de El Salvador [Participatory Radio Stations and Programs Association from El Salvador]

development, generally located in isolated rural areas, where sometimes there is no electricity or telephone.

Legislation is not enough, If it is not accompanied by development policies. The States have the obligation of guaranteeing access to new technologies of information as they somehow guarantee the functioning of libraries and public schools. Governments should take the responsibility to guarantee free access to information, as a platform for a democratic society.

Legislation, regulation and state policies we have previously analyzed determine to a great extent institutional sustainability of community media, particularly radio stations or independent television stations, but they do not constitute the only factor. There are many examples of community radio stations that consolidated in spite of threats and aggressions they suffered by authoritarian governments. This indicates that there are other aspects that directly impact on the institutional sustainability: media property, internal organization, working relationships, mechanisms and management transparency.

Community media property is the first decisive factor for internal sustainability. Appropriation of the communicative process cannot disassociate itself from the structure of property of community media. Who do frequencies, facilities and equipment used belong to? It is evident that if they belong to institutions outside the community, there must be a negotiation process, so that communication medium serves to collective interests.

Bolivian miners radio stations were since their beginning a paradigmatic example of media property, and for this reason several times they suffered attacks to destroy their antennas, their transmission equipment and their recording files. Some mining radio stations still have the scars of firearms shots on their walls or in their destroyed equipment. In the auditorium of the Mining Workers Union of Colquiri, workers painted a great mural where airplanes are shown bombarding the mining radio station in the 60s.



Relatively few community media really belong to the community. Most of community radio stations in Latin America, for example, belong to NGOs, to progressive Catholic church sectors, and even to governments. Projects of new information and communication technologies, that is to say, telecenters or community multimedia centers are generally property of cooperation organizations, as components of wider cooperation programs for development.

The working relationships constitute another fundamental aspect in the institutional sustainability. Who appoints community radios directors or telecenters managers? How are technical or artistic personnel hired? Is there a gender balance among workers? Community participation can not be aimed to if there is not first transparency and participation in management and programming within the community media. Unfortunately, internal democracy is not a norm in community media, and it endangers the participation and appropriation process.

In participatory communication, neither censorship or imposition can exist, but dialogue and consent. If it is a radio station, it is indispensable that programmers, program producers and journalists feel in absolute political and creative freedom. A community radio should not reproduce the same patterns as a commercial radio.

This is also reflected in workers' contractual situation, and their rights to social security and other benefits granted by labor laws. In community radio stations, a balance among waged personnel and volunteers, who also contribute in programming or promotion tasks, is sometimes very fragile. The mixture of volunteerism and professionalism sometimes creates institutional conflicts that endanger sustainability.

The definition of communicative political project is the basis of institutional sustainability because it establishes the direction of the community communication medium in the long-term. Who participates in the project definition? How are main decisions regarding the information policy and programming taken?

In Madagascar, orientation and programming of Mampita and Magneva radio stations are discussed in the general assembly of all associate rural organizations

with rural representatives' participation. In Philippines, the barangay—a group of local authorities— appoint a Community Media Council (CMC) to manage community public address systems and radio stations of the Tambuli network. In Nicaragua, the most important decisions on Radio La Primerísima are taken by the assembly, composed of radio workers and members of the radio listeners community. In the assemblies, voices and votes of journalists, speakers, executive personnel, cleaning staff, and some listeners belonging to APRANIC<sup>6</sup>, are equably respected. Every two years assembly chooses a Directive Board that makes decisions related to radio daily operation.

Finally, another aspect that contributes to institutional sustainability and also to economic sustainability, is rationality in decisions taken on technological resources, i.e., a technical dimension supporting political communicative project. The physical structure design, as well as the quantity and quality of equipment have consequences on sustainability.

To over dimension technological inputs is as harmful as to underestimate them. Many year ago, I visited the regional radio station of Bobo Dioulasso, in southern Burkina Faso. It had several extensive and totally equipped recording studios, and a very sophisticated Mobile Unit. However, the radio station did not even broadcast an hour of weekly programming. Studios and equipment were donated by a German cooperation agency, but the radio station lacked personnel and informative and programming policy. Their daily work was to broadcast the national radio station, Radio Ouagadougou. Meanwhile the equipment and the studios were covered by a thick layer of dust and weed grew around the mobile unit because its tires were flat and there was not money to repair it. Real necessities were clearly over dimensioned.

Community public address system of Philippines constitutes a contrary example. Their dynamic function over the community has been so important that some communities, starting from that experience, decided to create a community radio

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<sup>6</sup> Spanish acronym for Asociación de Profesionales de la Radiodifusión Nicaraguense, [Nicaraguan Radio broadcasting Professionals' Association] founded in 1990.

station. This is an example of rationality as for the necessary equipment, since it began with a minimum equipment, with a range of three or four kilometers, and then it increased according to the real community needs.

In occasions, it is not the quantity but the quality of the technology what endangers institutional sustainability. "Free Play" transistor radios are an example. They work with crank handle, and have been distributed in many countries of Africa. The origin concept is interesting: a receiver radio that doesn't require batteries to work; a crank handle allows to recharge energy manually from 20 to 40 minutes, depending on the model, avoiding battery expenses, which is prohibitive for most of the rural population in the Third World. However, sometimes technology does not respond to real needs. In 1999 I visited the field of refugees of Great Lukole in Tanzania, and I gathered these opinions on crank handle radios that had been donated: the crank is made of plastic and it breaks after certain time; its autonomy is very limited, so it is necessary to constantly recharge the radio; the receiver is too voluminous and too expensive in comparison with the models of batteries that can be bought in rural markets. Some refugees that I interviewed preferred to acquire a battery-radio<sup>7</sup> and even to adapt "Free Play" models, that had been donated by cooperation agencies, to run on batteries.

With the arrival of new information and communication technologies in the 90s, new distortions that affect sustainability take place. In some cases, digital equipment is incompatible with the rest of the pre-existent equipment in a community radio, and in other cases it is underemployed due to the lack of training. Programming automation, by means of computers, is not always the best solution because it alters one of the essential characteristics of community radios, its "live" quality. Automation is almost always translated into more music and less spontaneity.

Rationality to design a telecenter is even more critical because computer equipment is more fragile than that of radio, and have shorter life-span. It is almost unthinkable that telecenters operate for 10 or 15 years with the same equipment,

as it happens in many community radios. After three or four years computers are already obsolete. In Africa telecentres were established in places where electric power and telephone problems had not been solved yet, which makes evident a lack of planning. In a survey conducted in 1999, community telecenter users in Timbuktu (project of UNESCO and CIID), expressed that their main interest to go to the telecenter—in order of importance— was: radio, television, newspapers, telephone and letters; the Internet didn't appear in the list of priorities. The same study revealed that 51% of local population had never made a simple telephone call.

In most telecentres that I have visited, capacity and versatility of computers is over-dimensioned. The most advanced users, when do not go there to use the telephone or read the newspapers, use the basic programs (electronic mail, word processors, games and occasionally the Internet), less than 10% of the installed capacity. In fact, this does not differ from the use of computers by most people in industrialized countries where also a minimum percentage of the installed capacity is used. However, in poor countries the purchase of sophisticated equipment and their under-use do not contribute to sustainability and even outlines an ethical problem. How is investment in expensive equipment justified when certain basic communities necessities have not been resolved? In what sense can centers equipped with new technologies of information and communication contribute to solve the population's more urgent needs? It is certain that in many telecenter projects there are commercial agendas above community needs.

Based on the previous facts, Simputer's promise is attractive, a very simple laptop, developed in India, with an approximate cost of US \$250, and with capacity to satisfy the essential needs of 90% of users.

### Social sustainability

No community process can be sustainable if it does not have community support, and if it does not represent it in its programming and in its informative politics.

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<sup>7</sup> Models made in China cost less than US\$ 16 in local markets.

Social sustainability has to do with organizational, cultural and linguistic aspects, inherent to the communicative process appropriation. An experience of community communication is legitimated when its political communicative project represents the audience's aspirations. Its relationship to social actors is what guarantees its permanence throughout time and its consolidation.

Many experiences of community media have failed due to their lack of articulation with the social actors it should represent. As long as community voices stop from expressing through the community medium, an ideological separation takes place between the medium and its actors. The social appropriation process of the medium is diminished and interrupted. Therefore, the political communicative project has nothing to do with community aspirations.

This risk has been constant in the history of community radio stations, from the first experience in Latin America. In 1947 Radio Sutatenza (Colombia) was founded, to empower rural population's voices of the Tenza Valley, where 80% of peasants was illiterate. However, in a few years the radio became in a distance education network<sup>8</sup> at a national level, centralizing its operations in Bogotá. The participatory and community experience was very short, although the new project had other virtues.

Among the constituent elements of social sustainability, appropriation of the communicative process is perhaps the most important. It takes place through social actors' participation on community media management. If it is a rural medium that operates in a limited geographical area —as it is the case of the community public address system, the popular theater or FM radio stations— participation is direct through relationships with social organizations, groups of women, cooperatives, or youth groups. On the other hand, if it is a medium of higher coverage —as it is the case of AM radio stations— participation takes place through mail or telephone, or by agreements with social organizations representing the population as a whole.

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<sup>8</sup> (ACPO) - Acción Cultural Popular [Popular Cultural Action]

Video SEWA (India), the group of women movie-makers from Gujarat, is an example of direct participation, where the own stallholder women in markets, participate in the production of documentary videos about their reality. Some of them are illiterate and can hardly distinguish the camera symbols that allow them to operate the technology of the video. As they belong to a great association that represents women of informal economy, it reflects that there is no distance between the collective and its social base.

A national coverage medium as La Primerísima (Nicaragua), has other audience participatory mechanisms. It is a “live” radio; at any moment, during a program, telephone calls are received with audience’s comments without filtering the calls origin or quality. The doors of the radio station are also permanently open to those who want to be expressed through it. After a few minutes waiting, visitors go directly to the broadcasting booth.

The communicative process appropriation also has to do with demystification of technology and with the strengthening of the audience’s critical capacity. New technologies allow easy access to people with very different levels of education who become quickly communicators of their social, cultural, economic and political reality. This learning process and technology expertise have taken place in all participatory communication experiences we know. Youths from Bolivia mines or Tutsis refugees in Ngara learned how to operate radio equipment, as well as SEWA women and Kayapo indigenous groups from Brazil get familiar with video cameras.

Cultural and linguistic pertinence is another factor contributing to social sustainability of community political-communicative projects. Alternative, citizen's and community media express culture—in its broadest sense—which corresponds to the human universe in which it develops.

This explains the enormous development of Latin American radio stations that broadcast in indigenous languages such as Aymara or Quechua in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, or in some of the thirty indigenous languages in Guatemala and

Mexico. Attempts to assimilate indigenous populations through formal education systems that prioritize the teaching in Spanish, face indigenous nations' determination to continue expressing in their own languages.

A few days ago, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003, the Congress of Guatemala approved the legislation that makes official twenty languages of Mayan root, and also the garífuna and xinca languages. This measure will have impact in the educational system and in the cultural development of the country, favoring a more equal treatment towards indigenous populations. Maybe it also allows to grant new legitimacy to community radio stations that today are considered as "pirate radio stations"

Language and culture constitute expression and communication ways of and among identities. These terms of cultural exchange through communication processes are more balanced when different cultures are expressed on equal terms. The radio, rather than any other media, has allowed a certain level of linguistic and cultural democracy. On the other hand, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) constitute today the expression of the hegemonic Western culture that translates into a dominant position of English and some European languages over all others. This is one of the reasons why sustainability of telecentres is so precarious, particularly in Third World community environments: the access is restricted to those who speak and write in English.

Sustainability of the alternative and participatory media as a whole, strengthens when cultural pertinence becomes a norm for all of them. Some of them reinforced each other as identity strengthens with cultural diversity. Cultures that negotiate their cultural diversity with other cultures, should do it from their identity, and not from a surrendered position. The tendency to cultural homogenization implicit in the globalization processes, may annul identities and impoverish diversity. Community media have a very important role to defend the right to language and culture.

The development of local contents in participatory and citizen's media is another factor of social sustainability, closely related to cultural pertinence. The capacity to create a programming that responds to community demands and interests is one of the strengths of community media. The origin of many community radio experiences is an immediate service to community through social interest announcements. Therefore, it is not strange that community radio station becomes post office, department of complaints and a meeting place. Youths meet at the radio station, women complain on goods prices, the teacher warns that there will not be classes the next day, and the nurse announces dates for the next vaccination campaign.

Community radio stations have always offered this kind of service, informing on the prices of agricultural products in the market or on transportation problems. Radio Mampita in Madagascar broadcasts messages on lost or stolen animals, and it also helps identify them so their owners can recover them.

The community media programming structure is a reflection of its effect on the community and the level of participation and appropriation. In Tacunan, North Davao (Philippines), community is in charge of broadcasting programs through the community public address system. The nurse conducts a weekly program about health and the teacher a program about education, and community volunteers have other programs on agriculture, youths, women's rights and cooperativism.

Radio Kothmale, in Sri Lanka, is aware of the need to develop topics to serve local population and it uses new technologies to look for topics requested by the audience, and to spread them through the radio station in local languages. Kothmale has been mentioned many times as an early example of the convergence between community radio and new technologies.

In Nicaragua, Radio La Primerísima facilitates communication through the radio among Nicaraguans who work in Costa Rica and their families who are in their country. This live program, connected to Radio Cucú in San José, has sometimes helped to reunite families who did not contact for months or years. In a similar way,



Radio Kwizera sent messages from refugees in the camps along the Tanzanian border to their families in Burundi and Rwanda, with those who had lost contact due to the war and genocide.

Telecentres have a lot to learn from community radio stations to ensure their social sustainability. It is important to put an end to the myth of information access as a solution for development problems. Community telecentres should be inserted in community's daily life, and provide specific, and appropriate information to meet local necessities.

90% of World Wide Web content is unaware of 90% world population needs. Therefore in Chennai (India), Village Knowledge Centers<sup>9</sup> use Internet to provide local information through an access network of solar energy computers, connected to the "added value center" through a wireless system. Rural settlers from four communities can consult information on the prices of agricultural inputs, micro-credit, local veterinarians or weather forecast for the next days. This model prioritizes local needs rather than simple access to the Web. Instead of the World Wide Web with millions of pages in English that have nothing to do with Pondichery settlers, the Swaminathan Foundation has preferred to develop a local mini-web that offers practical answers to its users in its added value center.

It is not enough that a community medium has validity, but also impact or effect on the objectives of community organization and development. The concept of validity is not enough if it is limited to the popularity of a communication medium. Some radio stations are appreciated because they are dedicated to broadcast music throughout the day, but do not have any effects on local problems or contribute to the social, economic and cultural development. In the same way, there are community telecentres that lack a development participatory policy, and have validity only as they provide telephone, fax or e-mail services. In the analysis of social sustainability, it is very important to establish the difference between popularity and incidence, that is, the capacity to contribute to social transformations.

Maybe one definitive evidence of social sustainability is when communities defend their community media at the risk of their own lives when threats hang over them. In 1980, a military coup d'etat took place in Bolivia and dictatorship closed all information media in the cities. The army advanced towards mining centers to attack radio stations that continued working, and found resistance in workers, women and even peasants from neighboring areas, who armed with dynamite, sticks and stones, surrounded Radio Animas, Radio La Voz del Minero [Miner's Voice], Radio Nacional de Huanuni, and others to defend them. Something similar happened in Nicaragua in 1997 when the residents of poor neighborhoods of Managua surrounded Radio La Primerísima with sticks, stones and firearms, to defend it from occupation attempts.

#### Economic sustainability

We left economic sustainability at the end because it generally appears in the first place when community media sustainability analysis are made.

Community, citizen's, and alternative communication media should look for resources that allow them to finance their activities, to renovate their equipment from time to time, to cover the costs of public services, to pay workers and to invest in the development of new programming; all this in order to provide services to the community.

The same legislation that favors the statute of community radio stations in some countries that generally recognize them as institutions developing support activities for education, culture and development, generally limits the possibilities of radio stations to self-financing through advertising. In countries where that legislation exists, community radio stations are forbidden of generating own resources through advertising, and their broadcasting power is also limited. This is a contradiction between the legislation and promotion policies of the freedom of expression and cultural diversity.

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<sup>9</sup> This is a program of M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF).

If some coherence existed in State policies, radio stations and community telecentres should receive the same support as public schools, the libraries or national cultural projects. This does not mean that the State should intervene in the political and communicative project of community media, but should support their development as autonomous, and decentralized entities.

Decentralization and popular participation processes, that have been adopted by several countries of Latin America and Africa in the last fifteen years, are an ideal framework to strengthen community local media. In Uganda, the community telecentres of Nakaseke, Buwama and Nabweru —founded with the support of UNESCO, ITU and the International Development Research Center IDRC— receive small subsidies from local governments that have acquired autonomy and decision power thanks to the decentralization process.

Should the State support economically community media? Should legislation allow community media receive income from advertising?

These two options bear risks. If financing comes from the State, there could be political and administrative interference by governments in charge, as it happens to Indigenous National Institute (INI) radio stations in Mexico. And if financing comes essentially from advertising, there is the risk of falling into the hands of private companies controlling media through advertising accounts, as they do it with mass media imposing norms and censorship mechanisms.

From the point of view of economic sustainability, the ideal solution would be to achieve a balance among: the generation of income from advertising and agreements, the support by national institutions, international cooperation organizations and solidarity groups outside the community, and contributions from the community itself and from communication media workers.

National institutions' support seems to be the most frequent pattern in the development of participatory radio, and in the establishment of the community telecenters at a smaller scale. Most of community radio stations in Latin America, Africa and Asia continues functioning fundamentally due to the support they

receive from NGOs, from universities and progressive Catholic church institutions. Those radio stations' fundamental expenses such as equipment acquisition, workers' wages and public services payment, are covered with the contributions of the institutions. Anyway these are institutional projects, although in their development they have been identified with a participatory communication project. Some of the most remarkable experiences for their commitment to the community correspond to this category.

In many cases, the State sustains community radio stations, at least partially. During the last two decades the Institute for Social Communication (ISC) in Mozambique established a dozen of "community radio stations" in all the main villages. Besides equipment and training they received at the beginning of their activities, the ISC covers the costs of services (electricity, water, maintenance) and the wages of five or six permanent workers. The responsibility of these radio stations is to obtain additional funds to elaborate programming, in agreement with other local institutions.

International cooperation has also been very important for community communication projects, mainly for equipment donations and training support. North European cooperation agencies (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Holland) have worked together in many projects of community communication, mainly when the freedom of speech is threatened. UNESCO provided additional equipment and training for the local radio stations network in Indonesia; it established four community radio stations in Haiti; eight in Mozambique, among other projects.

It is not frequent that international cooperation agencies finance wages or services payment, because their own internal regulations prevent them from doing it, unless they are participatory communication projects framed within national wide development programs, for example FAO's rural video projects in Peru, Mexico and Mali.

However, there are other support modalities from cooperation and development agencies. Community radio stations can generate resources through programming

and co-production agreements. This formula has a comparative advantage on advertising income because programming benefits from interesting contents for the whole community. When I visited Radio Kwizera (Tanzania) in 1999, it had the support of Oxfam, of the Norwegian People's Aid, of the World Food Program, of UNICEF, of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and from other organizations to carry out programs on drinking water, human rights, resolution of conflicts, health, among other topics. The International Plan supports Radio Gune Yi, a program carried out with Senegal rural communities children.

The group of Theater Nalamdana (India), the multimedia project Soul City (South Africa), Radio Sagarmatha (Nepal), Carpa Lila (Bolivia), the Action Health's video unit (Nigeria), Theater Aarohan (Nepal) and many other projects of community communication, have received financing from organizations such as UNICEF, DANIDA, UNFPA, PANOS, DFID, USAID, Action Aid, Ford Foundation, CECI, UNESCO, and others, to elaborate education programs in sexual and reproductive health, and prevention against AIDS and other sexually transferable illnesses. It is one of the topics with the highest support because it is the first one in the agenda of some cooperation agencies.

Contrary to the experiences of theater, radio, marionettes or video previously mentioned, telecentres projects are less sustainable because most of them lack a programming policy with useful contents for the community. One of the biggest criticisms to telecenter establishment, is that technology seems to be the end, but not the means to get other development objectives. Many of these projects have been installed without communities' consultation, and without a sense of population's actual needs they pretend to serve. Undoubtedly, in many cases there is a business motivation to sell computer technology rather than development criteria for the social change.

International solidarity has been very important for popular communication projects that have not been born under the protection of an institution or of a cooperation and development agency. Specific supports guarantee the survival of community media in situations of risk and threats. They are very important because they

happen on the margin of institutional interests and are born due to solidarity communication through frontiers.

In several times, when mining radio stations in Bolivia were closed by the army and their equipment was destroyed or confiscated, the solidarity of European groups allowed them to broadcast again. The same thing happened to Radio La Primerísima (Nicaragua); when their broadcasting studio was sabotaged in 1990, solidarity committees from Catalonia, from Valencia and other regions of Spain, gave their support to buy a new transmitter.

Advertising can be a complement for economic sustainability, but never the main source of income, because it may distort the objectives and the political communicative project of an alternative, participatory and community medium. In rural areas, where community radio stations are the population's most important benchmark, local advertising can support economic sustainability.

It is not strange that community radio stations announce the town's bakery, the drug store or a restaurant to increase their earnings. Radio Izcanal (El Salvador), Radio Quilabamba (Peru), and many other radio stations broadcast advertising jingles of particular businesses in their range area or State institutions messages. The Gaseleka Community Telecenter is one of the most important experiences in South Africa; its manager's initiatives have allowed resources generation beyond the necessary for its maintenance. Offered services are not limited to Internet providers. As community radios, Gaseleka Telecenter is a post office, and also provides services to issue identity documents in coordination with the National Department of Identification. People do not have to travel to the city to have their pictures taken and to have their documents since two agents of that service arrive and work in the telecenter once per week.

Community contributions' importance is frequently underestimated in economic sustainability. We have mentioned before how Bolivian miners donated a day of their wages to maintain their union radio stations. In Burkina Fasso I verified that rural communities, where six local radio stations had been created in the 80's,

contributed with diesel for radio stations' power generators. In other cases, radio stations charge small quantities of money for their daily services and messages such as birthdays, deaths, music dedications, messages to the city, correspondence delivery, found objects, and so on.

However, money contributions are not the only way community supports economic sustainability. In all community communication projects voluntary work is one of the most important factors in economic and social sustainability, although it is certain that it also constitutes a risk factor for institutional sustainability. We have already seen that in many radio stations, programming is in charge of community volunteers or local social organizations. These voluntary efforts save money that would be necessary to pay producers and paid announcers. However, It is true that community radio stations invest time and make efforts in training volunteers that afterwards stop collaborating.

In many cases, communities contribute providing the land where the telecenter or the community radio station is located, or the materials used in the construction of the premises they work in. Participation is very common —specially in the Latin American Andean region— through community collective work to build the premises for the radio stations or broadcasting plants. In this way, community finances the political communicative project and supports economic sustainability of alternative and community media.

In alternative and community communication projects that have a more defined social political orientation, the alliances between media, and social and union organizations can contribute to balance economic sustainability, or to offer an institutional support.

## **Conclusion**

Although an ideal formula exists to guarantee sustainability of community media, actually its survival and development largely depends on the balance among social, institutional and economic sustainability factors. Communicative participatory processes that involve communities and contribute to strengthen local

organization, have better sustainability perspectives than those institutional projects dosing access and participation.

On the other hand, sustainability should not only be analyzed from the perspective of isolated experiences, but with respect to the relationships established among alternative, participatory and citizen's media. Networks creation, for example, is an additional guarantee for community media survival and development. In societies impoverished by exploitation, where civil society has withdrawn its reliance on political class, parties and traditional institutions, the emergence of new relationships of social actors, grouped around community problems, constitutes a favorable environment for sustainability.

What you have to keep in mind when speaking about sustainability is that communication processes should have a dimension that the community is able to assume. The appropriation process can only be obtained when community assumes a community medium in all its aspects: communicative policy, technology and administrative management. It is better to begin with limited own resources and to grow near the community than to establish vertically over-dimensioned projects that because of their cost or technology will limit spaces of community participation.

Every day, the globalization project threatens the survival of cultural and ideological diversity. Spaces of political plurality expression are much more closed and global flows of information are in the hands of a few multinational companies. The economic power expansion of a handful of hegemonic countries and the changeable application of the market laws, not only destroy national industries and agricultural production of the poorest countries, but has a negative impact on education, culture and forms of community social organization.

In this discouraging world panorama, alternative communication continues having the important task of strengthening cultural identities and favoring the development of new expressions in civil society. Its sustainability is above all the result of the political commitment of social actors.



Traditional assessors, who were used to manage quantitative approaches and to measure communication with calculators, have difficulties to understand that community media sustainability is ruled by other principles. We need less accountants and more sociologists to evaluate the impact of alternative, participatory and citizen's media. The dynamics of participatory communication processes cannot be measured in figures, but through an understanding of society phenomena around the poorest people's right to expression and free access to information.

Participatory communication processes are not lineal and homogeneous. Therefore, they require an effort of understanding and empathy that consider specificity and diversity of experiences. As Clemencia Rodríguez says:

I believe that it is precisely this explosion of communication in local environment what makes media become civic tools to strengthen democracy. The dysfunction of established power relationships constitutes a “tangled” enterprise and our attempts for order and organization can only be in our feeling of being uprooted from those processes.<sup>10</sup>

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\* Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, Bolivian, is a specialist in communication for the development with experience in Africa, Asia, Latin America and The Caribbean. His work as a specialist in communication has made him be familiar with diverse topics: the child's rights, indigenous populations, culture and development, human rights, community organization, health and sustainable development. He is the author of several books about communication among them: Making Waves: Participating Communication for the Social Change, The Mining Radio Stations in Bolivia (co-editor with Lupe Cajías), Popular Theatre, and several studies on the history of the Bolivian cinema. Since 1997 he is part of the initiative of “Communication for the Social Change” that promotes the Rockefeller Foundation.

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<sup>10</sup> Rodríguez, Clemencia (2001). Fissures in the Mediascape: an International Study of Citizen's Media. Cresskill, NJ, USA: Hampton press, Inc. page 161. Translated by AGD.