

A Healthful Recipe For Development: A Space Called Community Radio

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Science for Women: a Community Radio Project (Working Title)

Where can illiterate women in resource poor settings with low access to learning opportunities learn about health care ? How can universities and other institutions of higher learning, who have the means and the knowledge reach out to communities ? Community Radio (CR) , is one such low cost simple technology that can provide a bridge linking the two. C R has received a new impetus in India with the recent liberalization of the broadcasting licensing policy, whereby recognized educational institutions and selected NGOs are granted licenses to operate low power transmitters. Despite the rapidly growing interest in CR and notwithstanding the need for this people's media, the ground reality today is a bit of a conundrum. The license holders, mainly educational institutions despite the financial resources and technical skills at their command, rarely carry the mandate or the experience to work with communities, and, the communities who need a local voice lack the capacity to operate/sustain a radio station .

It is this gap that CEMCA seeks to bridge, through a project called Science for Women: Health and Nutrition, (SFW) supported by the Government Department of Science and Technology. SFW is a radio series, articulated through 13 community stations over a period of one year , where we engage the students and the listening communities, in a participatory process where the universities understand the community needs and the women learn simple production skills to create relevant content for radio. At each of the 13 locations, 1000 community women are profiled in a baseline survey with community participation, to map their media habits and information needs. Further, a smaller group is engaged in a joint capacity building exercise with the university. Other outreach activities like health camps and interactions with doctors further synergize this knowledge sharing process. The focus is on health and nutrition, where the listeners are active participants, at highest end creating their own content and the lowest, active listeners.

Our paper documents the shared gain and learning by both partners and helps build a model to successfully appropriate the medium for mutual gain.

INTRODUCTION

Women in resource poor settings in rural and urban areas across the country. A government department with a mandate for popularization of science and promotion of a scientific attitude and scientific temperament among people. And an organization committed to promote learning for development through the use of relevant and appropriate technologies. All come together in a space provided by institutions of higher learning - a space called Community Radio (CR) and a

unique project, Science for Women's Health and Nutrition (SFWHN), a radio programme series is created.

SFWHN is a project catalysed by the *Rashtriya Vigyan Evam Prodyogiki Sanchar Parishad* (RVPSP), which is the National Council for Science and Technology Communication of the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. Known for its mandate of popularizing science using creative strategies, RVPSP, began looking at using community radio as a means of reaching out to marginalized women, to create awareness about issues concerning their health and nutrition through a pilot project in the year 2004-2005, at the Community Radio Station of Anna University, Chennai, in South India. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response and results from the station and the community, RVPSP decided to upscale the project. Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) with its focus on open and distance learning, community participation and capacity building particularly with respect to promoting appropriate technology was identified as the nodal agency to orchestrate the project. This paper documents the project experiences and learning from it.

CR POLICY ENVIRONMENT

The struggle for community radio in India has been long and hard. Following a Supreme Court of India ruling in the late nineties that air waves constitute public property which must be utilized for advancing public good, in December 2002, the Government of India approved a policy for the grant of licenses for setting up of Community Radio Stations to well established educational institutions, The first CR to come up was at Anna University, Chennai. Subsequently a few other educational institutions and 'krishi vigyan kendras' (agricultural institutions) set up CR stations. Four years later, in 2006, the policy was further liberalized and broad based "by bringing Non-profit organizations like civil society and voluntary organizations and non government agencies etc under its ambit in order to allow greater participation by the civil society on issues relating to development & social change" (<http://mib.nic.in/CRS/press201107.pdf>). The new policy also addressed financial sustainability of the stations by allowing five minutes of commercials per hour of broadcast. Alongside, the government is also supporting an awareness drive to encourage the setting up CR stations across the country. Undoubtedly, all this has given a fresh impetus to the growth of CR in India but the expected surge in CR stations is yet to gain momentum. In practise, the ground reality of community radio in India today is a bit of a conundrum. Constraints by way of the licensing and regulatory procedures, financing mechanisms, and access to programming skills are some of the obstacles to a huge ground swell in civil society sector, who need a voice but often, lack the capacity to organise, operate and sustain a station. And the current licence holders, mainly educational institutions, despite the financial resources and technical skills at their command, rarely carry the mandate or the experience to work with communities. Thus of the current 40 odd licensed stations, less than one-fourth are in the civil society sector. Further, the policy also stipulates that "at least 50% of content shall be generated with the participation of the local community, for which the station has been set up" (<http://mib.nic.in/CRS/CRBGUIDELINES041206.pdf>). Thus the CR stations located mostly in the educational institutions do not function as strictly campus radio stations, but rather straddle two horses, trying to serve two communities, one a community of practice of students and faculty within the campus and the other, the community at large, located outside the campus, within the coverage range usually a radius of 5-15 kms around the transmitter.

CEMCA APPROACH

It is against this back ground of campus based community radio stations, that CEMCA is articulating its mandate of helping communities appropriate community radio as development tool. Philosophically two distinct approaches to community radio can be discerned, though the models are not necessarily mutually exclusive. One stresses service or community-mindedness, a focus on what the station can do for the community. The other stresses involvement and

participation by the listener. ("Conceptions of community in the literature: Models of community radio" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_radio). Staying within the current policy framework, without getting into the debate of ownership and management as key defining parameters of "community-ness" of the CR stations, CEMCA has been working with CR Stations, helping them engage with the communities outside the campus. Introducing participation as a key element in programming and redefining "ownership" as that of content and the skills to create it, rather than the physical ownership of hardware and infrastructure, CEMCA has been striving to help create a democratic space for the communities, narrowing, if not obliterating the division between broadcasters and listeners in the community. The Science for Women's Health and Nutrition, currently being implemented in 13 CR stations across the country, is one such programme where CEMACA is bringing the campus and the community together for greater common good.

PROJECT GOALS

The thematic focus of the project is on health and nutrition of women. Traditionally, women bear primary responsibility for the well-being of their families. Yet they are systematically denied access to the resources they need to fulfil their responsibility, which includes education, health care services, job training, and access and freedom to use health and family planning services. (*Coonrod C.S, June 1998*) Furthermore, women are also discriminated against as consumers of services, leading to gross neglect of their own health and well being. The overarching goal of the project for RVPSP was behaviour change, an increase in the Knowledge , Awareness and Practice (KAP) of women towards health and nutrition of themselves and their families, dispel myths and misconceptions and increase the overall utilisation of health information and services. The method adopted was to create a series of radio programmes , for a period of one year, airing one 15-30 minutes programme everyday and link these with outreach activities like counselling, medical camps etc. What made the project different from any other mass media programme was the medium chosen, namely community radio, which by definition had to follow a bottom-up and participatory approach.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

As the implementation agency, it is this process that CEMCA endeavoured to put in place, building a bridge between the campus and the community, creating a model for participation, where the CR Stations (educational institutions) understood the community needs and the community women began to view CR as their space and learnt simple production skills to create relevant content for radio. It is this shared gain and learning by both partners that helped build a model to successfully appropriate the current policy for mutual gain, despite some of its apparent inadequacies.

Implementation Methodology

First, to bring about a commonality of purpose , CEMCA conducted an exploratory workshop for the functional community radio stations (17 at the time), to explain the objective and methodology of the project. Being from an educational background, despite holding licences for CR, few were doing any community based programming. Though some stations carried programmes based on local talent -music, some festivals and fairs, most were producing development oriented content on a variety of themes usually produced by domain or media experts . At the exploratory workshop, over two days, participants, were appraised of two key elements of the project:

1. RVPSP goals
2. The participatory aspect of community radio

Face-to-face With The Community

Thirteen stations were identified for participation in the project. The very first step was to define the community and the focus group for the project within the community, namely women. It was agreed that each participating CR would conduct a baseline study. Based on the pilot project it was also agreed that at each CR, 1000 women would be profiled in a door-to-door survey. The idea was to create a data base of women, who throughout the project period of one year would engage with the CR. The expectation was that, at the higher end of participation, the women would become broadcasters, create content, mobilise other women, help organise outreach activities and develop a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the station. At the lowest end of participation, the women would be active listeners, giving their feedback to the station, interacting with the CR. The objectives of the baseline study were to capture: .

- the socio-economic and demographic profile of the target community: (potential listeners and participants)
- their media habits, particularly with reference to Radio,
- issues of concern for the community like local area problems that could be find space on the community radio
- willingness/readiness of women to participate in the community radio initiative
- build awareness for the Community Radio and SFWNH

The process of conducting the baseline study itself was made participatory. While a basic survey schedule was designed by CEMCA, some sections on local issues were customised for each station after discussions with the CR personnel, domain experts and representative community members. Data were collected by teams comprising students and faculty as well as community women. Local NGOs, Self Help groups and other women's organisations in the catchment area (where the station could be heard) were also brought in. A through training was conducted in survey techniques. The survey demanded a minimum level of educational qualifications. Community women, who did not have the requisite qualifications were roped in as facilitators, who took the survey teams into the local residential areas and introduced them, paving the way for a smooth transaction.

As part of the baseline survey procedures, the CR stations printed stickers announcing the CR name and frequency and each surveyed household was pasted with a sticker. The baseline survey created awareness of the CR station and in some measure, an audience for the station. Prior to the survey, most stations had very little listenership in the community, ranging from 3 to 15 percent. (Detailed reports of all the stations are available on CEMCA website www.cemca.org)

Since the survey also had a section on willingness and readiness of women to participate in various capacities in the CR as community mobilisers, talent, announcers, radio jockeys etc, the survey provided a ready reckoner of names and addresses for future use by the CR.s

Creating Opportunities For Participation

Guy Bessette (2004: 14-16) observes that participation is "central to the task of defining and achieving development." Participation focuses on empowering local people, through building their conviction that they are not "permanent victims of any situation." By empowering local people first, participation does not become an "extractive process of information, enlisting or mobilizing community support" for centralized projects conceptualised, planned and controlled outside the local environment. Keeping this as the guiding philosophy, the next step was to initiate an actual process of Participation by equipping the community women with the required skills for articulation and production. Capacities of both the institution and the community had to be built and At each CR, capacity building workshops were held, using experienced broadcasters from the local area . The capacity building focused on :

1. helping participants ideate, develop ideas into programmes
2. handling simple recording devices
3. studio and outdoor recordings
4. various production formats, interviewing skills
5. basics of editing

The purpose was to put a process in place and create a first set of trainers, who would then become trainer of trainers (TOTs) and over a period of time, create a resource in the community and the CR station. Though hesitant at first, across the board, women participated enthusiastically and mastered several key skills of production and broadcasting. The Capacity building experiences and the workshop productions of the CR stations are also available on CEMCA website (www.cemca.org).

BEYOND PARTICIPATION AS CONTENT PRODUCERS

In order to ensure that the participation does not remain confined to the project initiation phase, CEMCA and RVPSP have put a project monitoring and evaluation mechanism in place with indicators that capture levels of participation, like:

- Extent to which the baseline data is applied to programming (e.g. SFWHN slotted during the most popular listening slots, issues of local concern reflected in programme content etc)
- Number of women participating in programmes at various levels (from the database of 1000 women)
- Constituting a programme advisory committee with community representation, who meet periodically to steer the programme committee
- Involvement of local domain experts –like doctors and nutritionists too ensure locally relevant content, (as opposed “educational” content created by the colleges)
- Participatory formats used for programming
- Number and type of outreach activities held and community women involved in organising and uptake of services offered at the
- Increased listenership from the baseline study (through an en-line survey). As an indicator of popularity of the CR.

PROJECT GAINS AND LEARNING

A major achievement of SFWHN has been, that it has energised the community radio stations into a participatory mode. It is through this project that most of the CRs, came in direct contact with the communities outside the campus for the first time. Granted, that some colleges (like those offering agricultural sciences, home science etc) or the mandatory National Social Service (NSS) programmes did have outreach programmes and as such interacted with communities outside, but with a totally different perspective, where the communities were passive beneficiaries, not active participants.

SFWHN with its project funding has helped create a small corpus fund to meet the fixed and recurring costs of the CR. Until now, most colleges did not have a clear programming budget for the CR. Often mired in a bureaucratic administrative set-up, CRs found it difficult to access programming funds in a planned manner.

Despite it being mandatory to employ dedicated staff, most CR had only one or two part-timers, while students and staff doubled up as programme staff. Educational institutions, with their teaching –learning concerns as their primary focus could not give the CR station any sustained time, leading to inconsistent and uneven programming inputs. Colleges that offered mass communication studies fared better as their faculty and students were better oriented to radio production and used the CR as their learning laboratory. Here too, the community element was missing. SFWHN funding has helped CRs employ project staff, who are able to run the station in a more organised manner.

Also, the community resource pool is helping CRs create a content bank , use exciting and interactive formats and increase their hours of transmission. In a very small way, the CR is offering some alternative means of livelihood also for the community.

The project has created awareness for CR as a whole and opened up new spaces for the community women to share and create knowledge on a host of issues that concern them. Across the board, there have been instances of hitherto very low profile and marginalised women , daily wage earners, agricultural and construction labourers , petty shop owners and homemakers, have found a new interest, discovered latent talent and a new found confidence. In some CRs, these women have become announcers, interviewers, script writers and contributors to programme ideas and talent.

The CR has also benefited immensely by this project, in terms of gaining a specific identify and an audience and above all , perhaps most importantly, this participatory project has given the CRs a true feel the community and a *raison d'être* .

END NOTE

SFWHN is essentially work in progress, operationalised in a context where community radio is yet to establish the structures and processes as citizen's radio. Based on what is seen as a positive response, the project, currently being implemented in 13 stations, is being further upscaled to cover other CR stations that have been set up since the project was first initiated. However, evidence is anecdotal and at this time, conclusions tentative. Only an end-line survey will establish the extent to which the project has attained its KAP objectives and the internalised participation as a sustained process. But undoubtedly a beginning has been made. A bridge has been built between the community, who can pro-actively claim a piece of the CR pie and establish it as their own means of communication and the educational institutions, currently the custodians of a democratic space to share it with its lawful and intended claimants for mutual gains.

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