

Community Radio for Development: the COL approach



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Transcript

Respected Prof Khan, Ms Zohra Chatterjee, Mr Jagdish Gandhi, Dr Sreedher, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is indeed an honour and a privilege for me to be at this valedictory session of the first 'Regional Consultation for Community Radio Awareness' organized jointly by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA) and the City Montessori School. We are grateful to the Govt of India and particularly to Ms Zohra Chatterjee for their confidence and support. I bring to you greetings and best wishes from the President & CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning Sir John Daniel and my colleagues in Vancouver.

As an intergovernmental agency set up by Commonwealth Heads of Government in 1987, the Commonwealth of Learning works to empower Commonwealth citizens to be agents of social and economic development so that the international development agenda articulated in the UN Millennium Development Goals and the Commonwealth priorities of peace and good governance can be advanced.

COL is a small organization, yet it works in 49 of the 52 Commonwealth countries. We have strong networks with ministries of education, national institutions and civil society organisations. Traditional teaching methods cannot cope with the scale and diversity of learning needs, but rapidly evolving information and communication technologies can help bring quality learning to millions of Commonwealth citizens. This is what we have tried to achieve in the last twenty years of our existence. CEMCA is our office in New Delhi and caters to the educational technology needs of the eight South Asian Member States.

COL works with both low-end and high-end technologies. The COL Media Empowerment project uses community radio to empower people in remote and rural areas in different regions of the Commonwealth. COL has been active in promoting and developing community radio in the Solomon Islands, Uganda and Sri Lanka, to name a few. The main focus is to help rural communities to address issues related to health, basic education and gender.

How does the model work? First, we find a suitable local group. Then we train them in how to operate and maintain the FM stations. Basic business skills are also imparted to ensure the sustainability of the radio stations, even after COL has left. Once the station is in place, it provides an opportunity for policy

makers to observe the social, cultural and infrastructural issues that need to be addressed at the local level. This is perhaps an unintended consequence of the community radio project.

In Papua New Guinea, COL is working with the Ministry of Education to implement a solar powered FM station in a remote mountain community so that educational programmes can be broadcast to communities in their local languages. PNG has hundreds of languages and some communities are virtually cut off from the rest of the world. Community radio has helped the local people to become producers rather than mere consumers of content by developing programmes relevant to the community in their own language. This helps preserve indigenous knowledge and local wisdom honed over centuries of experience.

In Northern Uganda, COL worked with an NGO to set up a solar-powered FM station which can reach a target audience of 10 lakh Luo language speakers. The daily programmes deal with health, agriculture and gender issues. This successful intervention has encouraged the government to set up five additional radio-stations in the region. Not only do the programmes address the issue of HIV/AIDS but was also helpful in containing the Ebola outbreak in 2000. The Ministry of Health used the radio station to provide information on the preventive measures for the local community to deal with the crisis.

What are the lessons that we have learnt from our experience in different jurisdictions?

First, it is important to involve the community at every level of the planning and implementation. A participatory approach and a sense of ownership are critical success factors for the sustainability of community radio. A committee of local representatives needs to be established early in the planning process to ensure that the implementation takes place in a timely fashion and that the persons responsible are accountable for achieving their mandate.

Second, partnerships are critical. Instead of working in isolation, it is important to forge partnerships and establish networks. Community stations need to form alliances with local health providers, educational institutions and local businesses to generate both information and resources.

Third, while it is important to preserve and disseminate local content, it is equally important to be aware of the best practices at the regional and global levels. Sharing free content or Open Educational Resources or OERs, is becoming a major collaborative movement that will help developing countries to access the latest information and ICT developments free of cost.

Finally, the training and re-training of personnel at every level is important so that the equipment that has been put in place is optimally utilized and effectively maintained.

So what do Intergovernmental bodies like COL have to offer?

We are convinced that the successful use of any technology for learning in a country depends on an enabling policy framework and a realistic time-bound implementation plan. We provide technical assistance to ministries to develop appropriate policies.

In many countries, there are insufficient budgets set aside for training by ministries. COL can provide training in both content development and delivery.

When COL initiates an activity, it tries to analyse how the model works, what are the critical success factors and what needs to be changed. We are then able to share the experience of these models with other Member States. We can help with different kinds of research as well as monitoring and evaluation.

Finally, we help work with organizations and institutions to produce training materials. COL then tries to get them adapted and used across the Commonwealth. COL plays a catalytic role, and uses its convening power to bring partners together to make this happen, just as has been done in the case of this consultation. Often this results in very productive coalitions of people with similar objectives and shared values.

India is an important contributor to COL and since half the population of the Commonwealth lives here, we work with many partners in this country. I believe this regional consultation has been an important milestone in framing an agenda for future action. Both COL and CEMCA stand ready to work with you to create adequate opportunities for communities to develop need-based programmes of high quality in the areas of education, health, and livelihoods.

At the CHOGM held in Uganda last week, climate change and environment emerged as a major priority for Heads of Government. We in the developing world are quite conservative with our use of resources and have best practices to share in this area. Let us use the community radio movement to harvest these experiences and share them with the rest of the world.

We are all vital stakeholders in promoting learning for achieving the development goals. Together we can overcome the challenges to give voice to the voiceless and empower the last person in the queue.

Thank you for your attention.