Reflections on a two-week global LinkedIn debate: Community participation for radio financial sustainability

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Abstract

A lively debate on (community) radio sustainability took place on the LinkedIn platform, with more than 200 people, from all continents, sharing and discussing simultaneously in English, French and Spanish. The debate was initiated in April 2014 by the communication consultancy CAMECO, run by its team of professionals with supporting translators, and coordinated by the authors of this article for ten days.

Introduction

With the aim to support the development of strong community communication, this online debate was a first pilot to bring together experiences from all corners of the world. Over the past years, CAMECO worked with radio associations and single stations in Latin America, Africa and Asia in order to collect data about community participation in local and community radio stations. In the CAMECO surveys, financial sustainability stood out as the most common challenge to the stations. CAMECO therefore decided to make this the focus of the first online debate, hoping and trusting to generate concrete and practical examples from stations and their partners, to inspire and strengthen participants in the debate – and beyond. Depending upon the outcome of this debate, CAMECO would consider continuing the online exchange with other issues of importance in their project Participatory Radio.

Why – the issue

Making a community radio sustainable is a challenge everywhere in the world. It is generally acknowledged that sustainability is affected by external factors, such as an enabling environment (i.e. legislation), and internal factors within the station itself, including social, organisational, and financial sustainability. These three internal factors are mutually dependent and reinforcing – and community ownership and participation have been proven to be the most important aspects of sustainability.

Participants of the online debate recognised these interdependent factors while zooming in on financial sustainability, the burning issue mentioned by all radios: how to get the financing mix right, and how to match the financial needs with appropriate and effective income generating activities.

There are many kinds of local radios with many different agendas and owners, but community-oriented radios were in focus in the online debate. Most of these stations could be called 'community radios for development and empowerment' and are as different as the communities to which they belong. What the communities have in common is the desire to use their radio as a platform for community debate and dialogue. They wish to bring about justice, accountability and rights, generating social change and leading towards a move towards the development vision and dreams of their community.

In most places, such community radio stations give people a voice and an opportunity to speak for themselves, which– better than anything else – leads to the empowerment required to trigger an avalanche of positive personal and community change. The power and potential of this type of community radio has also been discovered by development partners aspiring to meet the Millennium Development Goals, as can be seen e.g. in the recommendations of the Commission for Africa (2004), the World Congress on Communication for Development (2006), the 10th UN Inter-Agency Round Table on Communication for Development (2007), and SIDA's Policy on Culture and Media in Development Cooperation (2008). Increasing numbers of individuals, organisations and institutions have seen the powerful impact generated by community radio stations, identifying them as the potential "missing link" between development support being provided and true development actually taking place[3].

While well-established in many countries with regional and national community radio networks, in collaboration with and supported by other facilitating organisations providing assistance and capacity building as well as some funding, community radio still faces a lot of different challenges: maintaining a strong community engagement, having an effective management, meeting ongoing capacity building needs due to a high turn-over of volunteer community broadcasters, ensuring programme quality and appropriateness, mastering technical challenges, and dealing with the impact this has on the difficult task of getting expenses covered by an appropriate funding mix. These challenges are the same in all parts of the world.

How – bridging distance through LinkedIn

After research into different possible online debate fora, LinkedIn Groups was chosen as the best-suited technical platform. With LinkedIn, (1) we could accommodate the three parallel language streams, and (2) we were able to structure discussions by opening different forums. Moreover, LinkedIn is free, it does not require any special technical installations, and it is also operational on limited bandwidths, which is the reality among some of the audiences working in community radio stations in rural locations. We chose to have one main group, Radio and Participation and to submit three language streams therein: Sustainable Radio (English), Radio Sostenible (Spanish) and Radio Viable (French).

With the overall theme of financial sustainability, a concept paper shared recent thinking around the issue in three languages, the profiles of five radio stations were pre-prepared, daily themes were proposed for debate, and the coordinators, as well as the CAMECO team, provided additional comments to spur on the debate. To bridge and bring together the debate in the three separate language fora discussing the same daily issues, summaries were compiled based on contributions from all three language groups, and made accessible on the CAMECO site.

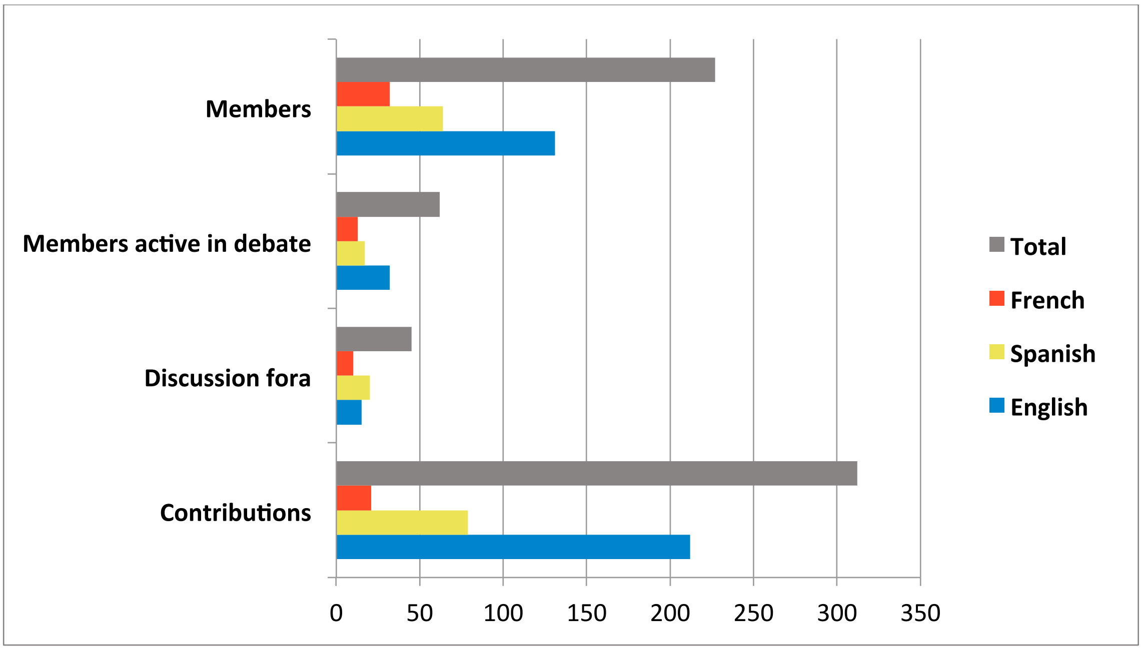
Because in the French language stream the debate took a little longer to become lively, an additional Facebook page was established to motivate participants. Some debate took place there, and it did inspire more action in the LinkedIn forum. It was, however, also clear that for a systematic debate, theme by theme, where each contributor builds on input from the other participants, LinkedIn was much better suited. LinkedIn furthermore offers pre-defined spaces where the ground rules, code of ethics and other important frameworks of the debate can be presented, and to which participants must agree before engaging.

Our experience was that LinkedIn served its purpose and lived up to the expectations and goals of the organisers, although many participants were not (yet) familiar with that platform. But once they realised the need to become a registered LinkedIn user in order to take part in the debate, this also worked well.

Who – participants in the debate

Two hundred and six participants from 35 countries on all continents joined the debate. In addition, two Indian community media organisations – Ideosync Media Combine and Community Media MANCH – translated the summaries of the debate into Bengal, Hindi and Tamil, making them accessible to stations "across the lengths and breadths of India", and retranslated results of their discussions into English for the international audience. The Bangladesh Network for Radio and Communication informed us that they provided access to the summaries through their website.

Roughly one third of the registered members sent posts, but we could see that many more were actively following the debate through downloads of summaries and other resources on the CAMECO site. The table below shows the number of registered and active members of the three language streams, the number of discussion fora established (the first ten were created by the moderator), and finally, how many single contributions were posted in the three languages.



Managers of twenty radio stations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and further ten persons active in associations and capacity building organisations supporting and working with community radios, participated in the discussion fora. These were the core groups we had intended to engage, and as organisers we were very pleased that we indeed succeeded in reaching these central persons and groups through a number of relevant networks. Besides, people from all continents, working professionally as advisers, consultants and experts, as well as a few academics, took part in the discussion.

What – the themes:

In the debate, daily themes were set, all representing aspects of what it takes to secure financial sustainability. The themes and main issues extracted are presented below:

- Participation in income generation
- Prerequisites for effective income generation
- Different ways of raising income
- The role of networks and strategic partnerships

Participation in income generation

Knowing that community radios that remain on air and become sustainable are driven by a strong community "ownership", participation in securing financial sustainability was the core strain of thought going through all the separate debates under specific headings. The debate highlighted different community participation strategies. In Asia, a favourite model is the formal inclusion of community through participatory governance structures, creating "ownership" not only in a figurative sense. SAMAD FM in Nepal, for example, accepts individuals and organisational members, organised at village and district levels. These members contribute to the income of "their" station with regular membership fees, but also with collection and sale of in-kind contributions.

Listener Clubs – often called "Fan Club", "Friends'" or "Family" of the station, are favoured in Francophone Africa and some countries in Latin America. At Radio Salaki in Burkina Faso, listeners in each village are represented by a board. One person is in charge of marketing in each village, and club members sell listeners' cards and music dedications, in such a way that the income generated is shared between the village radio club and the radio station.

The regular participatory process at Radio Oriente in the Peruvian Amazonas is less formal. The radio calls meetings to share important proposals and needs for the radio to ensure dialogue with authorities, but also with trade unions, associations and civil movements. This approach is considered by Radio Oriente management as the "basis for an environment of open dialogue and participation. We go to them, and they come to us."

Prerequisites for effective income generation

The prevailing consensus was that, to become sustainable, a community radio needs strong community ownership that grows out of community participation and engagement in the radio; and content that is relevant, addressing issues of importance to the lives of people. All these factors are interdependent.

Many debaters stressed that the success of a radio depends not on issues related to financing, but on good management, adequate staffing and numbers of community (volunteer) broadcasters (both in terms of quantity and quality), knowledge of the target/audiences (research) and the programmes a community wants. A member of Ghana Community Radio Network reminded us that governance and community ownership are challenged if transparency is questioned.

Although the legal framework is outside the reach of the individual community radio, it is an area where many (national and international) community radio associations are active with their advocacy work. Most concerns had to do with unfair restrictive legislation, which prevents community radios from possibilities offered by commercial advertising, as in Chile and Kenya. Announcements are only allowed for supporting enterprises from within the community the radio serves. Several examples were provided from Latin American radios that decided to operate on a commercial license to overcome unfair legislation, and participants discussed whether this affects the community identity. In some legal environments, such as Chile and DR Congo, not-for-profit radios can hardly fulfil the technical and tax requirements of a commercial licence.

The Coordinator at Kenya Community Media Network (KCOMNET) argued that a strategic plan is key to any community radio, and shared the strategic planning document of Radio Mang'elete. Among the lessons learned is the importance of not only an appropriate and competent leadership at management levels, but also of the boards, which should represent as many different interests within the community as possible – with experts for financial management, a person with good coordination skills, knowledge about effective programme production, good community contacts (maybe a traditional leader) and technical skills, in order to unburden the station manager from being the "sole champion".

Different ways of raising income

As a prelude to the discussion about different ways of raising income, a forum was opened to debate which kinds of income are acceptable. It was generally agreed that a healthy mix of different forms of income should be strived for. With the exception of community contributions, over-reliance on any one source should be avoided. The suggestion to "just live within your own means" came from Nepal, but this "survival mode" was especially challenged by colleagues from different parts of Africa, who referred to the extreme poverty of some of the communities. An overview of the vast variety of different examples discussed is provided below.

On-air income generation

Community sponsorship: In those countries where the acquisition of commercial advertising is not allowed, community radios reported how they raised income through community sponsorship, advertising social events, airing information about deaths or lost animals, or getting local advertising from salons, shops, private schools, etc.

Selling greeting cards/SMS greetings: The sale of greeting cards is a popular method to raise income at many radio stations, carried out by members of listeners or friends' clubs. A lovely example from Colombia was provided: a station sells "radio serenades," broadcasting with a mobile unit from the house of the person receiving the dedicated song. Some stations started to use SMS messages with charges slightly higher than the standard rates for these greetings as an income source, in agreement with the mobile telephony providers. A radio in Uganda reports that sending SMS messages was not popular among the listenership until it was combined with a raffle. But other African debaters made a strong point against the use of SMS: "Don't even think of it amongst very poor populations." In Kenya, however, Ghetto FM in the capital city experienced that attractiveness was higher when SMS messages were also linked to additional Facebook and Twitter accounts. This was the only example provided of harnessing the power of social media and mobile phones to increase revenue of the station. Although this approach had been discontinued, it still raised much interest amongst debate participants.

Programme partnerships: A couple of stations partner with groups interested in producing their own programmes on the understanding that they fit into the overall programme concept, and a percentage of any revenue raised through advertising is submitted to the station. Alternatively, as was the case in a couple of African stations, the groups contribute a few litres of fuel for the generators. In addition, some stations also produce targeted programmes for NGOs and are paid for doing so.

Off-air income generation

Listener clubs and membership fees: The stations with a membership structure or listener clubs regularly charge small membership fees. In addition, many communities are asked to provide support through in-kind contributions like rice, vegetables or other products that the station can then sell. Many station directors consider it a key to success to work closely with the communities, and staff is responsible for member liaisons. Radio Salaki from Burkina Faso stresses the effectiveness of the "regular motivational monitoring visits", when staff members visit villages to collect their donations. Symbolic gestures, like the issuing of membership cards, which also allow members to attend meetings, where they can suggest debates in which they may also take part.

Raffles and festivals: The most entertaining ways of raising income are raffles and social events. Radio Pa'I Puku, in Paraguay, raises one third of its income through a raffle and two farmer festivals, constituting the most popular attractions of the Paraguayan Chao. In 2013, five hundred volunteers sold 38,000 raffle tickets. Among the attractions is a bullfight with a borrowed animal that is returned to the farmer unharmed. Radio Veritas, in South Africa, raises funds with a lottery for winning a pilgrimage to Rome and Assisi. Reference was also made to the organisation of social events to collect money for addressing critical issues in the region, like the "let's run for water" initiative in Vietnam, where listeners paid a registration fee to take part. The money raised should go to a good cause, with a percentage left to aid the radio's operation. This can help the radios to win respect from the community they serve, ensuring that people will remain loyal and keep supporting such events.

Sales of branded promotional items: T-shirts, caps, diaries with radio logo, are also a common means of income generation among many radios.

Selling office services: Multimedia centres in Mozambique, with combined radio and internet cafés, told of selling computer-based courses, typing letters for community members and providing photocopying services. These are the main sources of income for many such radios/Community Multimedia Centres. However, whether these services corrupt the identity of the radios was also considered, and it was argued that, in poor communities, such services hardly have any economic potential. At the same time, however, there are examples from various countries providing evidence that such services are in high demand particularly in poor communities, as the radio might be the only place to send an email to the central government, to have a formal letter written or an application or CV typed up, and the much needed photocopies taken.

Recordings: Several proposals were made for earning money with studio facilities. Radios in Niger, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, South Africa and Colombia offer to record local bands. The music groups can sell the CDs produced or use them for promotional purposes. In Lao PDR, pilot stations record the music of ethnic groups that are popular among young and old alike. In Mozambique, community radio stations exchange locally recorded music and traditional stories for the technical support services from the engineers of Radio Mozambique's provincial and national stations, as it is not possible for provincial and national radios to move around communities and record.

Generating business units: An impressive list of examples of radios that opened up parallel enterprises was contributed: running a farm and selling agricultural products, production of yoghurt, traditional medicine, running a company for house construction, event management, and one radio even bought a cable TV system. Some ideas were closer to the media system, like book shops, publishing houses specialised in tourist guides for their region, or collecting and printing local fairy tales. Other proposals included reading aloud short books on air, and selling the recordings as audio books afterwards. Radio Magnificat in Brazzaville, Congo, has established an audio-visual unit and offers CD duplication of choral works of religious groups. Some radios rent out sound systems and a hall for private events, or even stacks of plastic chairs for local parties. To reduce energy costs, a radio decided to install a solar system for their transmitters, and another one can even sell residual energy from a solar system to the local community. This implied high investment for the installation, but plenty of savings later on (for additional examples, see the CAMECO Publication Energy for Radio - A Guide for Practitioners). Examples of abundant entrepreneurial spirit were accompanied by warnings that parallel enterprises also require professional management, a capacity that is often missing in an ordinary community radio station.

Barter and in-kind contributions: Bartering in exchange for advertising is done for lots of services and commodities that a radio needs, like the printing of stickers, administering the website, or staff meals in a restaurant. It might also be the first step towards convincing possible clients about the effectiveness of advertising on the radio.

In regions where cash is scarce, radios invite listeners to contribute with in-kind goods. Radio Bangu, in DRC, visits villages, accompanied by famous facilitators, to collect maize, cassava, pineapple, and vegetables. At Samad FM in Nepal, the collection and sale of fruit and vegetables is organised by the membership boards. In Brazzaville, Radio Magnificat asks for reams of paper, a few litres of diesel, music CDs, and blank DVDs. In Lao PDR, rice farmers donate some of their crop.

State funding: Information about available state funding was collected in the debates. The new media legislation in Argentina includes a community radio fund, available only to stations with a licence– and only a few stations have one, since the state does not currently launch tenders for licences. In Senegal, Burkina Faso, Benin and other West African countries, the state provides an annual "structural grant", of which a part is dedicated to radios –the amount in Senegal is about USD 1,000 per year/per radio. The Media Development and Diversity Agency in South Africa, a public-private partnership, offers support for not-for-profit and small commercial media for plurality in the media environment, and the Culture Ministry in Colombia provided funds for specific projects over a limited period.

The role of networks and strategic partnerships

Debaters highlighted several examples of networks of community/not-for-profit radios that joined forces to organise common services, i.e. training, maintenance, etc., but also to use the accumulated power for fundraising, lobbying and the establishment of partnerships. Most examples came from Latin America.

The Latin American Radio Education Association, ALER, is engaged in content production, educational campaigns, civil society mobilisation, experience-sharing, and fundraising. with a common advertising salesperson for all network stations, it runs an advertising agency of national networks (also producing spots and PR material) and negotiates contracts with public or private entities and NGOs for the design, implementation and monitoring of educational campaigns, participation in national or regional development programmes on issues like human rights, environmental protection, citizen participation, etc., and offers paid training of journalists on specific issues.

The Forum of Community Media in Mozambique, FORCOM, channels partnerships on the priority development themes to its almost fifty member stations, and many radios state this as their main source of income. Furthermore, FORCOM assists with legal advice, capacity building, technical advice, support to a gender network and national advocacy around the enabling framework – all of which also has an important impact on the financial sustainability of the member stations.

The establishment of joint advertising agencies was not successful in Australia and Uganda, while the model of the Coordinadora Nacional de Radio, CNR, in Peru, was proposed as a best practice example. CNR created a market for rural areas through audience research, and the development of a lifestyle concept, and strategic partnerships with radios even outside their network. Potential clients were convinced by comparative advantages such as close audience relations, transparent practices, and billing in national currency.

In countries where the concept of community radio is still relatively new, like in Bangladesh, it is assumed that networks not only play a role in financial support, but also in the establishment of an identity of their own as mainstream broadcast media and in achieving global recognition.

The joint strengths of networks also play an important role in the collaboration with local and national governments. In Peru, a roundtable was established with state educational departments to plan common activities in order to promote participative budgeting, public investment projects and local development plans to be agreed among local governments and communities.
In the Dominican Republic, the national planning office of the central government supports radios with a monthly subsidy for their educational services. In 2013, the radio network

UDECA and the Education Ministry signed a contract for a national alphabetisation campaign. The government pays for these services with reasonable sums. In a similar way, the Ministry of Women and UDECA collaborate in the development of a campaign for the prevention of gender violence.

The national meeting of thirty communication cooperatives in Argentina in March 2014 invited a representative from the Federal Authority for Audiovisual Communication Services. He explained the different government support lines for community media (Fomeca), offered help when the radios presented their projects, and manifested his interest to hear proposals from the communication cooperatives, and to establish common action.

What emerged – assessment

This being a first pilot exercise, we, the organisers were satisfied. Managing sixty active participants and more than three hundred contributions in three languages, with daily cross-cutting summaries and participation in the debate over a period of nine days kept us busy more than full-time, while the two translators and the five-strong CAMECO support team worked half days on average.

To what extent this intense period of debate has influenced the global debate on financial sustainability of radio can be hard to measure. But, as far as we know, it is the first debate of its kind in three languages where the substance of the debate in each language stream has been shared through daily summaries, thus potentially inspiring continued discussion across continents. The main objective, to share experiences between community radios and networks across the continents and to provide inspiration for income generating activities, is even harder to measure. The various requests received to find a way to document findings and deliver additional details about certain initiatives are an indicator that participants found some of the examples of ideas and concerns indeed worth further reflection.

What worked well?

The broad participation on a global scale made it obvious that there is a genuine interest and need for such an exchange, a fact that was also stressed in the final statements from participants in the debate. It was a genuine sharing experience that did not exclude failures, also mirrored in additional materials provided by participants, and made available to "outsiders" for the first time – ranging from self-developed tools to evaluations and examples of a successful strategic plan, and, of course, the very concrete data shared by those stations who had agreed to function as "models". Contributions were practice-oriented, and at times concrete enough to understand how strategies were implemented in different parts of the world, what factors are considered key for success, and which implications certain strategies have, also with respect to prior investments.

What did not work so well?

Despite intensive efforts to bridge language barriers, discussions were not frequently taken up in a forum initiated in another thread, and moderators were too busy with the sheer volume of contributions to be able to invest more time in the moderation and function as "bridges" between language streams This was also partly due to the fact that we underestimated the enormous interest the forum would find.

What did we learn?

Although we now know better how tough the organisation and facilitation of a debate of this type can be, we still find the effort was worthwhile considering the quality of the contributions.

The engagement and dedication of the whole team – including the external colleagues supporting the transfer of materials and summaries into different languages – was impressive, and good to experience. We also learned that discussion fora focussing on different aspects should be opened up from day one and onwards, in order to improve the channelling of discussions. And finally, we learnt that the time span should definitely be reduced to not more than one week. To maintain such intensity for two weeks is almost impossible, and it was very hard to regather speed after the weekend.

Way forward

As proposed by participants in the debate, we are presently in the process of editing materials and contents to make them more easily accessible in a well-structured "package". A decision was already taken at CAMECO to go ahead with the project "Radio and Participation", and to continue the discussion. Which aspects will be in focus next time might be decided in a "poll" among the previous participants. To be kept up-to-date with developments and activities, please register to the Radio and Participation LinkedIn group under https://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=7484798&trk=anet_ug_hm

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[3] For more on this approach, see Jallov, Birgitte (2012) Empowerment Radio – Voices building a community. EMPOWERHOUSE.