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The spectrum fee controversy in India during the past quarter seems to have followed the course of the country’s weather. After a summer of disturbing heat, the monsoons have kept most of the country vulnerable to prospects of droughts or floods.

In April 2012, came the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology’s (MoCIT) scorching announcement of a five-fold hike in the spectrum fee for Community Radio broadcasters in the country. What followed was, a summer of discontent for community radio advocates and practitioners alike.

The concern was not surprising: In terms of actuals the hike meant a whopping rise from Rs 19,700/- to Rs 91,000/-. For a sector that is committed to providing a “voice to the voiceless” this was not tenable. The fact that it came at a time when many in the sector were grappling with the issue of sustainability merely underlined its disquieting implications and evoked strong reactions.

Decrying the hike, the Community Radio Forum of India did not participate in the Delhi consultations organized by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting and CEMCA. The Community Radio Association of India met with MoCIT minister, Kapil Sibal and urged him to withdraw the hike. Many CR stations articulated their discomfort and pointed out that the hike threatened both sustainability and survival.

The reactions from outside the country were also impressive. The AMARC Asia Pacific Board urged a roll back through a formal statement. Several members from AMARC also wrote into the network expressing their concerns on the India hike in particular and the spectrum issue in general. Data provided by them enabled the AMARC secretariat to undertake a mapping of the spectrum fee scenario across 55 countries. (Details are provided in http://www.amarc.org/documents/AsiaPacific/spectrumandlicencefees.pdf)

Legal experts within and outside the country pointed out that the hike handicapped access and struck at the roots of freedom of expression. They quoted the Principles published in the declaration on diversity in broadcasting by the Four UN Special Rapporteurs on Freedom of Expression. “Community broadcasting should ...benefit from fair and simple licensing procedures ... (and) from concessionary license fees.”

Within the country, CR advocates and practitioners also took up the issue with the mainstream media resulting in several press reports in both regional and English language publications. Members of the National Advisory Council (an apex advisory group at the national level) also articulated their concern at the hike. These included Aruna Roy (Right to Information) and Mirai Chatterjee (SEWA).
The concerted effort appeared to have paid off – underlining the power of community participation. At the end of the first week of July, (just as the delayed monsoon had begun to indicate its presence in many parts of the country) reports in the mainstream media indicated the MoCIT decision to “waive” the spectrum fee hike for community radio stations in the country.

This may be good news, but clearly it is far too early to cheer. For the latter – an official statement needs to emerge. In its absence, many in the sector have started to speculate: Does the waiver spell a roll back or a complete withdrawal? Will this happen? And - when?

While the sector needs urgent answers, the apparent silence from official quarters is deafening.

Like the enigmatic 2012 monsoons, the sector is watching and waits with bated, but increasingly impatient and disenchanted breath.

Note: Ashish Sen wrote this article in July, 2012 soon after mainstream media in India reported about possible rollback of the Ministry's decision. As of the 2nd week of September 2012, the Government of India has not made any such announcement causing much distress and angst among community broadcasters and supporters in India and internationally. However, on September 5, 2012, answering to a member's question, the Minister of State for Communications and Information Technology of India informed the Parliament that a high level committee constituted by the Department of Telecom to look into the matter of spectrum fee hike had submitted its report on the matter and that no decision had been taken yet.

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New publication for community radio stations

Titled 'Learning with Community Media' - is edited by Ian Pringle from COL, Ekta Mittal from Maraa and Monica Valdes a Colombian journalist and anthropologist, currently a Training Director with AMARC in Latin America and the Caribbean regions.

The link to the publication is available at http://www.col.org/resources/publications/Pages/detail.aspx?PID=413. There is a full color version download at 7 MB (pdf) and a low res black and white download at 3.5 MB (pdf). For further inquiries, please email: ram@maraa.in
In their presentation titled ‘Community Radio is the Answer: What is the Question?’ at the AMARC Asia-Pacific Regional Conference held in February 2010 in Bangalore, India, Sir John Daniel and Jan Pringle articulated that the scale of ‘learning for development’ challenge, is so overwhelming that all viable methods must be harnessed to realize it. Community radio is a powerful tool to aid learning, especially community-driven informal learning because it allows learners to identify their own priorities based on participatory and constructivist mechanisms.

Indeed, for community radio movement to thrive and gradually attain its purpose of social change, it must work in tandem or partnership with groups/organizations that are active in other social change sectors such as health, food security, right to information, disaster management, bio-diversity, conflict resolution etc.

However, the challenge for community radio stations in partnering with development organizations – both governmental and non-governmental is to be found in the way the concept of ‘participation’ is perceived and interpreted by the partners. Owing to its widespread use in varying contexts, the concept of ‘participation’ has become clichéd, nebulous and distorted. It has been reduced to a multipurpose label to give respectability to a project.

CR practitioners espousing ‘Participatory communication’ advocate that media technology can become a full partner in the development process only when the ownership of both the message and the medium - the content and the process - resides with the communities. Hence, any ‘learning for development’ initiative via community radio must ensure that the participatory message development process of community radio by itself becomes a training ground for participation in the broader issues of development at the community level.

For participatory communication to be effective, it must be transactional in nature wherein sender and receiver of messages interact over a period of time “to arrive at shared meanings.” A Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations report (2003) on Communication-Based Rural Adult Learning Systems emphasizes that non-formal education must be based on sharing of knowledge between technical experts and rural people. The process begins by “listening to rural people” and there is a shift to farmer-led identification of learning and training needs based on practical experience. This is a suitable case of working in partnership where participatory program production would generate ‘learning for development’ in the spirit of the rural proverb - What I hear, I forget; What I see, I remember; What I do, I know.

Let me give you the story of Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS). An independent organization working in the largest district of Gujarat state in western India for the empowerment of rural Kutchi women, it has several issue-based units for education, health, savings and credit, marketing and design support, legal aid, panchayati raj and communication.
KMVS produced a series of participatory, local-language radio programs, in docu-drama format with the central focus on participation of women in political processes, specifically panchayats at the village level. With the Government making provision for 33 percent reservation for women in panchayat bodies, there was an invariable demand from the *mahila sarpanchs* for training to enable them to function effectively. This demand became the pivotal theme for the serial. The program produced through participation by communities in the drama, song, and news-reporting, generated a debate on gender issues on the one hand, and *swaraj* (democratic self-governance) on the other. *Kunjal Paanje Kutch Ji* went on to win a prestigious national journalism award.

Another CR station, Sangham radio is a station managed and run by rural Dalit women, who are members of a local NGO, the Deccan Development Society (DDS) working since 1983 in the Medak district of Andhra Pradesh. For these women who are equipped with remarkable oral narrative skills, radio is a natural medium. DDS works with the women *sangams* (voluntary village level collectives) and adopts a participatory approach to strengthen all its creative initiatives through a process of capacity building in the areas of people’s agriculture, health, education, knowledge, and value systems. The programming content of the station is a reflection of the activities of the DDS women themselves and seeks to promote indigenous knowledge and local cultures through the folk traditions of song and drama. Participation in radio programming comes easily in communities where a culture of popular, local participation in development efforts has been integrated over the years.

This brings me to another pertinent discussion here about NGO-run or NGO-facilitated CR stations and the difference in their approach to participation in the day-to-day functioning of the station. If a CR station is being managed by a professional radio expert appointed by the NGO from outside the community; its programs, formats, timing, etc are decided by the ‘experts’ within the NGO, and do not emerge out of engagement with the community; the radio only replicates the larger donor-driven agenda of the NGO; programs are produced without direct involvement of the community - only ‘for’ them to listen to. Even if the community participates - the script is given to them and they only act out as talent; it is not their ideas, knowledge, perspectives, issues and culture that are foregrounded; and there is no sense
among community members that this is 'our' radio; then it is an NGO-run station. This unwelcome trend is being termed now as NGOisation of a CR station.

Practitioners espousing ‘participation’ must be wary of partnering with such stations as this reflects a form of pseudo-participation. When we say NGO- facilitated, it simply means that the NGO is a facilitator in providing a platform for the people to produce their own media (access to media); provide a voice to people who have not been heard; ensure that the voices of the disadvantaged are given value; all steps of program production happen with the participation of the community - conceiving, scripting, recording, production and post production; people from within the community manage its day-to-day affairs. The emphasis here is on community mobilization, building capacities, involving the marginalized, creating spaces for collective action and so on. The idea is also to blur the difference between the so-called listeners and the content producers. The station is thus driven by genuine participation, where the NGO plays the role of hand-holding and facilitating and not 'dictating'.

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Obituary

AMARC Asia Pacific Regional Board offers its heartfelt condolences at the sad demise of veteran broadcaster and an AMARC member Thilak Jayaratne of Sri Lanka on September 7, 2012 following an illness. He was a former director of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and was instrumental in introducing the education and the community radio services. Thilak had been involved in the electronic media in for over 30 years and was one of the key persons in setting up UVA community radio.

All those who knew Tilak, and who encountered him in the many different orbits that he inhabited, will recall the intensity which he worked, and the creative passion with which he interrogated the potential of mass communication, and ‘alternative’ media, long before these became fields of study and academic discourse.

His vast experience and knowledge of participative media and community based radio was a source of inspiration for many of us at AMARC.
“Before I was not able to voice my opinion but this training has given me the much needed confidence to speak up. I am aware of my rights and have learnt to differentiate between right and wrong” said Gita Khanal of Radio Rampur, Palpa, Nepal after attending the follow up training on “Empowering Women through Community Radio in Nepal”.

Gita is one of fifty one participants that were trained through the project “Empowering Women through Community Radio” implemented by the AMARC Asia Pacific Regional Office in Nepal. The training focussed on making good radio programmes using gender sensitive language, interview techniques, information packaging, making radio spots/PSA involving women in a sensitive manner including technical skills such as digital editing, mixing, using good sound effects, studio and field based program production techniques. Since November 2011, fifty one Nepali women community radio broadcasters representing fifty different community radios from over thirty districts of country have been trained on using community radio as an empowerment and development tool.

It was a gratifying experience to see how some of these participants have transformed and grown in the last eight months during the project period. Yam Kumari KC of Radio Myagdi shares, “this training has given a new perspective to my daily work. I had the knowledge but did not know how to put it into use. It has given me the confidence to share my knowledge with others.” Sharing her knowledge and creating gender awareness is what Yam Kumari has been doing since her participation in this training. She has travelled to different villages in her district conducting gender sensitization training under the Village Development Committee Fund. Though she was the only women in the group it did not deter her from travelling to remote areas to conduct the training.

After attending the capacity building training Narmaya Rasaiilee an outspoken and active participant from Pokhara organised a meeting amongst the community radios in Pokhara to share her learning and most importantly to create awareness about gender equality. This resulted in the formation of a Media Mission - a network that is working towards establishing gender equality in media in Kaski district. Media Mission has conducted awareness campaigns and gender training in radios that had not participated in the AMARC training and broadcasted programmes on
gender equality. The reason for holding the follow up training in Pokhara was to assess the work done by this group of women led by Narmaya and get to meet the others who had joined the effort in raising awareness.

Anita Ghimire, a Technician at Radio Mahakali, Kanchanpur, Mahendranagar was shy and would not even speak up in the training when I first met her. Following her participation in the training Anita left the comfort of her home to come and work for a while in Pokhara in Radio Gandaki. Today Anita works not only as a technician but also programme producer. Anita actively voiced her opinion and thoughts in the follow up training that was held in Pokhara in July, 2012 and is putting her training into good use.

Through this intervention AMARC aimed to train these women broadcasters’ not only for producing good radio programmes or learn technical skills but also to teach them the benefit of networking and learning from others. The training introduced them to the AMARC Gender Policy for Community Radio and shared best practices on the use of community radio for empowering women and for achieving gender equality. The training has impacted on their professional as well as personal lives.

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Bina Gaihre of Radio Waling, Syangja is soft spoken and of diminutive stature but with steely resolve. During the High School National Level Examination she broadcasted the news of rampant cheating that was going on in the nearby examination centre and alerted the Examination Supervisors to the issue. Though she was threatened with possible attack and her radio had to escort her to and from her home for a month she has not given up her job in her community radio. In fact when she was offered a job in a bank in her area she refused the position. She prefers working in her community radio and is incorporating all her learning from the training into making her radio programmes better.

There are over 200 community radios operating in Nepal, out of which only 6 radios are run by women. Women make up 40% of all staff in community radio in Nepal but they mostly work as program producers or as presenters. Currently only 5% of women are in the decision making positions in the community radios of Nepal.

Each of these women I met came from different backgrounds but what bound all of them was the struggle each one of them went through to become the person they are today. Nepal is a patriarchal society with deep rooted norms and traditions. Even in the capital city Kathmandu, women are bound by social and cultural boundaries. The situation in the villages is much more
difficult. Despite these barriers, women broadcasters have pushed the boundaries and are making their voice heard. They are on the road to change their community. Some of them have already become role models for their community. Some are raising their voice for gender equality while some are struggling to make their voice heard amongst men in their radio station. Some are on the way to change how radio programmes can impact and empower women. Some are learning how change has to begin from oneself. The road to gender equality in Nepal is a long way ahead and there are miles to go but the step towards that goal in community radio has already been taken.

Prativa coordinated the "Empowering Women in Nepal through Community Radios" program, which trained about 50 women community broadcasters of Nepal. She can be contacted at chhetri_prativa@yahoo.com

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