

Book review

Empowerment radio – Voices building a community is a 2012 title from Birgitte Jallof – longstanding authority in the field of community radio and communication for development in Africa and Asia. This text simultaneously charts the making of community radio (CR) while outlining a framework for better understanding the dynamics involved in taking CR from idea to airwaves. Traditionally, community radio is tagged *the voice of the community*; but what this text offers is an opportunity to go beyond the tag and acknowledge the developmental potential of CR. In any case, that should be the essence of community radio stations regardless of where they are located – providing a genuine people-based platform from which a community can truly experience sustainable development.

If a radio system reflects ownership and management by the people of the community; carries the voices (views, opinions, and stories) of the people in content designed, produced and presented by the people of the community; and has a mandate of working towards addressing the issues and struggles for social change on behalf of the people of the community and does so without commercial profit motive then that is community radio. And, is this not more than just community voices on air?

Such a characterization presents obviously inherent challenges to financial sustainability; and given the traditional location of CR systems in and among economically poor and politically activist communities this is even more critical. Development activities that do not prioritize sustainability in all its dimensions - human, social, financial, environmental, or institutional - are already flawed. Community radio as a development tool must therefore emphasize sustainability; and this is an emphasis which Jallof underscores by taking on the issue at all levels throughout the entire volume even while having special sections dedicated to the issue it self. Experience in the field does show that sustainability is high among the most fundamental challenges faced by many communities and resources such as community radio whether they are remote, rural, sub-urban or urban located. Her rich experience, and by extension her authority, in designing and conducting impact assessment across the African and Asian regions go a far way in making the content of *Empowerment radio* credible, accessible and understandable.

In as much as this tome is about sharing cases (and there are many) in how to ensure success with community radio systems it is particularly timely and relevant to discussions about meeting the millennium development goals (MDGs). As 2015 draws closer every one is concerned with the MDGs. Targeting a wide cross section of audiences, especially in development communication which itself is an ongoing definitional project, may have been a little risky. Some may say the move is justifiable; others may not. For me, development is about all people; and so, what is more exciting is the prospect of its instructive value to those development people who seek to improve lives and are still struggling with making the right connection with the people. Communication, and by extension, information communication technologies, are integral to the development process but only become meaningful and productive when that process is underscored by continuous dialogue with and through the people. This is what community radio as empowerment tool is and should be about.

Empowerment Radio is arranged into five parts addressing broad themes of sustainability; community organization and ownership; establishment; how to build long term sustainability for empowerment; and understanding the enabling environment. Each section speaks to critical linkages across the entire community radio product and provides a sort of template from which to build a better understanding and appreciation of the history, context, process and practice of community radio. Critical elements in measuring impact both as a communication channel and a tool for community development are also identified.

Interestingly, the longest section is on the establishment of the radio as a community system. This is a difficult process for any community to deal with primarily because it is when the real hands-on issues come to fore and the realities of being on air and what it takes to remain on air are driven home. What are these practical realities? Not many communities are prepared for nor understand the roles, responsibilities or functions of management. This ignorance is especially compounded because of the collective spirit that is a core characteristic of community radio. Many community radio systems are the consequence of external intervention usually by international development aid agencies and very often the physical technology is in place before the human and intellectual capacity are even identified. Consequently, matters of training, content development and programming, engineering, and keeping the system alive emerge and are dealt with on the fly. The intuitive ways in which some of these matters become learning experience are more of a testament to the desire of communities and the leaders of the community radio system to survive as a community in the first instance. The community will therefore do anything to ensure that their symbol of community ownership and identity does not fold.

In making this an expanded section, Jallof not only demonstrates a deep appreciation of these challenges but offer workable experiences, examples, and cases that can be of tremendous help to a first timer or a well seasoned CR collective or individual. Recent experience in the English-speaking Caribbean tells me that many of the radio stations would find tremendous value in this work at especially two levels: one is the affirmation that they are not alone in facing these challenging realities; and two, is finding potential answers from voices that though coming from diverse places and history share a similarity of spirit and purpose – to mobilize for social change and improved lives. The latter is tremendously significant to the community development and empowerment process.

As Jallof states in the Forward, “the intention is to help all participants interested in supporting community radios for empowerment to get it right. Its desire is to facilitate learning from the experience of others, to enable inspiration by example”. There is no reason why both intention and desire should not become reality given the practical way in which the book has demonstrated what it takes to make community radio a meaningful tool for development and empowerment.

Empowerment radio - Voices building a community is a highly recommended resource for a wide cross section of community development stakeholders involved in project design and implementation to monitoring and evaluation; assessing impact to deciding social and human development policy direction; and importantly, for those laying the foundation – including university lecturers – for building relationships that enable and facilitate sustainable community ownership of its critical resources. These resources surely must include the information communication technologies that best allow for the voices of the community to be a springboard for improving the lives and well-being of all the peoples of the community. Community radio is one such resource and this text an extremely critical supplement to transforming community voices into sustainable empowerment radio.

Patrick Prendergast

Lecturer in development communication at The University of the West Indies, Mona

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