

Liberia



Community radio **A force for change**



www.rntc.nl | www.informotrac.org

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A force for change

Development of the media

RNTC is a centre of excellence in the field of media, education and development based in the Netherlands. RNTC mission is twofold: to contribute to the development of the media and to promote the use of the media for development.

RNTC has over 40 years of experience in training journalists and media professionals in developing countries and countries in transition. The trainings take place in our training centres in the Netherlands and Costa Rica, as well as through multiple projects implemented throughout the world. We hope with these trainings to contribute to enhance the reporting quality, especially in radio and television broadcasting and in the new media such as the Internet.

As institute, RNTC is anchored in media, education and development. Over the 40 years of its existence, RNTC has evolved from a broadcast training centre to a centre of excellence in these fields. It has gained a solid reputation as a reliable partner for radio stations, educational institutions and development organizations working in the field of media for development.

Learning by doing

This reputation is built on the wealth of experience and expertise in capacity building that RNTC has acquired and applied in many different countries and regions of the world. RNTC is also known for its innovative approach, developing new (educational) methods based on the lessons learned in its own practice and research by others in the field

In its capacity building efforts, RNTC takes as starting point the needs and demands of the people and organizations involved, and the context in which they operate. This is not only crucial in terms of relevance and applicability, but is also a prerequisite for ownership on the part of local stakeholders. Capacity development is not just a technical process involving the simple transfer of knowledge or organizational models. In order to develop an approach that best fits the local circumstances and the needs in a particular situation, the broader political

and social context within which capacity development activities will take place must be taken into account.

The strength of the RNTC method lies in the effective learning environment it creates by combining theory with practice, the emphasis being on learning by doing. Adults find it easier to learn when active participation is expected from them rather than following passively a series of lectures. Receiving and giving feedback on one's own participation and that of others stimulate the uptake of new ideas and skills. Knowledge that adult learners discover for themselves is better assimilated than when handed to them on a plate. It is also important that learners relate to what they learn and can apply it in real-life situations and their working environment.

Media for development

The media play a key role in the development of a country. They can inform and educate people, give them the possibility to make informed decisions and enhance the quality of their lives. The media can facilitate dialogue and discussion, can give a voice to the voiceless, and can create a diversity of views and opinions. They can be a factor of social cohesion and can contribute in reducing the gap between social groups. They can be a tool to establish good, responsive and accountable governance and a tool to fight corruption.

Over one billion people in the world live in utmost poverty with less than a dollar a day, 2.6 billions people live with less than 2 dollars a day. Their revenue is not sufficient to cover their daily needs, a situation which can lead to dependency and eventually social exclusion, and a very limited capacity to participate in civil society.

RNTC believes that the media have a crucial role to play in the development process. A professional, independent and reliable media sector reflecting diversity is a powerful instrument in the struggle against poverty. It encourages good governance and

stimulates democratic processes. The World Bank considers the lack of access to reliable, relevant information to be a symptom of poverty.

“A free and independent media is an essential element of any stable and prosperous society. In the modern globalizing world, information sows the seed of prosperity, and those without access to information are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to building a better future for themselves and for their children.”

Shashi Tharoor, UN Under-Secretary General, Communications and Information¹

The role of the media in development used to be perceived to be relaying information on health, agriculture and other issues related to development. However, the media play a much more extensive role than being a mere channel. The media can give people a voice; provide a forum for dialogue between communities and government. They have a specific responsibility to ensure vulnerable groups in society are included and represented in their programs.

The media can go beyond facilitating dialogue. They can call authorities to account for their policy choices and the way those choices are implemented. Effective and reliable media are essential for the establishment of good governance, and as such essential for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.²

Local development

Over the last years, the press and electronic media have been growing rapidly in various countries. Most national TV and radio stations are concentrated in capitals and urban areas. In the more remote, rural areas, community radio is often the only means of information available and has a large audience within the population. Relatively inexpensive, community radio fills the gap left by national and commercial media. It fulfils the role of public broadcaster, informing people at the local level and representing their views.

¹ *Statement during the Global Forum for Media Development in Amman, Jordan, October 2005*

² *World Development Report 2002, UNDP 2000; www.un.org/millenniumgoals, p.182.*

In Africa, in particular West Africa, community radio stations play a key role in local development. They provide communities with information about the problems they are facing in their daily life, which are not covered by national stations. Community radios educate, sensitize and inform the local population on issues of direct concern to them: health, education, drinking water, human rights, etc.

To achieve sustainable development, communities must be able to express their opinions. With the rapid spread of mobile phones, the participation of the population in programs content through interactive broadcasts has increased tremendously over the last few years. Community radio stations give a voice to the voiceless, enabling people to speak out and make their opinions, grievances and ideas known to those having the power to make decisions. In order to stimulate the democratization process, civil society organizations need to participate actively in public discussions. Community radio can contribute considerably to establish a dialogue between the local government, the civil society and the community.

RNTC and community radio

Radio is a perfect medium for building on the oral tradition in African societies, and has a direct impact on social development. Easier to maintain and cheaper to operate than television, radio is the most popular medium in Africa. Because of its reach, its



qualities as a spoken medium and thanks to battery-operated or clockwork sets, radio is more accessible to most people than TV, printed media or Internet.

RNTC has a long history of working with community radio stations in developing countries. The centre has long-standing ties with community radios in Latin America and has worked with many stations in Western and Southern Africa. Through this experience, it became clear that a more integrated approach was needed to support effectively community radios, which led to the development of the Initiative For Mobile Training of Community Radio, or INFORMOTRAC program.

Capacity building

RNTC aims to build the capacities of community radio stations to serve their communities through quality programming. Launched in 2003, the INFORMOTRAC program is currently implemented in 6 countries in Africa: The Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea Conakry, Liberia, Senegal and Sierra Leone. A similar program is being implemented in Congo Brazzaville.

INFORMOTRAC was developed around the specific needs of community radio stations. It provides equipment combined with technical support, ongoing training opportunities and the establishment of a stations network. In each country, RNTC offers an integrated training package in journalistic skills such

as on-air presentation, radio interviews; technical training in editing, sound engineering, use of equipment; management training, audience research and programming, enhancing community involvement, as well as technical and logistical support.

The focus on local capacity and setting up mobile training units are key elements of the program. RNTC invests in local trainers, employed by local media support organizations, and works with them to develop their skills and knowledge in developing tailor made, locally appropriate trainings. INFORMOTRAC trainers travel to community radio stations to deliver the training on site. This is extremely effective as people are trained in their own environment and context, while regular broadcasts can remain on air. Key to RNTC approach is that it does not come with ready-made solutions but helps partners to find appropriate solutions through the facilitation of endogenous processes. Consultation and close cooperation with those involved is axiomatic if the needs and priorities of both the direct beneficiaries (media or intermediary organizations) and indirect beneficiaries (local communities) are to be identified correctly, and if plans to address these needs and priorities are to be realistic. This approach is also essential to achieve effectiveness in the design, implementation and evaluation phases of activities.

The program is always carried out in partnership with a local organization, carefully selected based on its performances and potential. A substantial investment is made in the management of this counterpart organization, as well as the training



of local trainers and technicians who will form the local training unit. The income generating activities of the counterpart organization such as making co-productions and joint training programs contribute to its financial sustainability.

Radio Kasumay and Radio Quelele (Guinea-Bissau) raised people's concerns about corrupt government officials; Radio Awagna focused on the post-conflict development of civil society and peace building in the Casamance region; and Radio Bintumani (Sierra Leone) focused on issues related to education.

Thanks to training and assistance in acquiring modern equipment, recording, reporting and interviewing by phone in the studio or in the field on a distant location have become reality for the stations involved. Having improved their performance, with their equipment supplemented, these stations are now able to serve better their listeners.

Roles and functions of community radio

There is a general consensus, that a free, professional and diverse media sector makes a considerable contribution to the reduction of poverty, the promotion of good governance and strengthening the democratic process. Especially in rural areas, community radio play a key role in social change. Based on the UNESCO Handbook for Community Radio³, the role and function of community radio can be summarised in 10 points. It is to:

- 1 Facilitate open dialogue and democratisation**
Community radios are an essential tool for dialogue between the community, the local authorities and civil society. The promotion of democracy involves a far broader range of activities than simple promotion and organisation of elections.
- 2 Promote development and social change**
Community radio supports local discussion within the community to assess their environment, the causes for their problems and possible actions to be taken to address their situation.

³ UNESCO: *Community Radio Handbook*, 2001

3 Create a diversity of voices and opinions on air

There are points of disagreement in every community, resulting from different interests, different ethnic, linguistic or religious backgrounds, or simmering conflicts from the past. By airing and discussing the various views and opinions, the issues become better understood, and easier to address, giving each a chance to share their side of the story.

4 Reflect and promote local identity and culture

Community radio broadcasts programmes in local languages about issues that have immediate impact on the community, taking into account the social cultural environment.

5 Provide a diversity of programmes and content

The content of programmes on community radio is directly relevant to the listeners in rural or specific urban areas. Themes often covered include issues about health, agriculture, fisheries, the environment, credit opportunities and local market information, etc.

6 Promote civil society

Some community stations, especially in countries which have quite recently adopted a democratic system of government, focus on explaining the implications of democracy and civil society, raising awareness on people's rights as well as their obligations. They emphasize good citizenship to guarantee the new found freedoms result in harmony and social progress.



Sierra Leone

7 *Promote good governance*

Playing the role of 'watch dog' of the community, the radio can play an important role in holding (local) authorities to account.

8 *Encourage participation, information sharing and innovation*

In its original design, community radio actively encourages and seeks out the participation of members of the community in all sorts of different programmes and roles in the radio. Listeners can draw inspiration listening to their peers, and learn about 'best practices' of others. With the rapid spread and accessibility of mobile phones, the number of interactive programmes with audience participation has increased tremendously over the last few years.

9 *Give a voice to the voiceless*

In many traditional societies, certain groups are seldomly heard, like women and children, youth or minority groups. Community radio can provide them with the opportunity to make their voices heard.

10 *Contribute to peace building and reconstruction*

This is not specifically stated in the UNESCO handbook, but we have seen over the past few years that radio can play a vital role in peace building and reconciliation, making reliable information available, and enabling different sides of the conflict to come together and talk instead of fight. Experience in Sierra Leone and Liberia shows the positive contribution made by community radio in the reconstruction process.

Challenges

Although community radio stations play a central role in community development, they face a number of challenges to produce quality programmes, in terms of content, production quality and community involvement. The local relevance of the stations is a key asset, but they need to provide quality programmes to ensure continued audience, and support from the community.

• *Lack of journalistic and technical skills*

Staff for the stations are recruited from the community, generally without any formal training and on a voluntary basis. There is a relatively high turn over, as especially young people move on to positions in the more established media. There is a huge demand for continuous basic training for staff, as well as for more specialised training for technicians and/or content specialists.

• *Community based programming*

Community radios derive their strength and popularity with their audience from the direct participation of the community in the station, in both programming and management. In practice this is often harder than it seems. Mobile phone technology has increased the participation tremendously over the past few years, but more remains to be done to enhance the active engagement of the community with the stations.

• *Management capacity and financial sustainability*

Management training, audience research and programming are often underestimated, and



do not receive the attention they deserve in the establishment and support of community radio stations. Without proper management skills, as well as some knowledge of financial management and income generation, it is very hard for the stations to survive without donor funding, which will always, eventually, dry up. The financial sustainability of the stations and the ability to generate funds are vital, yet seem to be taken for granted by managers and funders alike.

- **Outdated equipment**

Another challenge faced by community media is the maintenance of their equipment at production and/or broadcast quality. After the initial investment, or donation, funds generated by the stations tend to have to be used for running the station, including for example the costs of a generator, leaving little for upgrades and quality assurance of the equipment used. Over time, this has an impact on the quality of production, and audience satisfaction.

Community stations are by definition relatively small, and often situated in locations where basic services, like a constant supply of electricity, are lacking. Due to these conditions equipment suffers and needs to be vigorously maintained and/or regularly replaced. It is also important that the equipment is suitable for the conditions.

- **The wider media landscape**

In many countries there is still a lack of a clear regulatory framework in which the community radio stations operate. As they are often not or poorly organised, there is little collaboration or joint pressure to change this situation, and improve the legal framework and working conditions for community radio stations.

- **Training opportunities**

As stated above, there is a tremendous need for continuous training and support for the community stations, in all aspects of making radio, including how to work with the community in the production of programmes. Training on offer in most countries however, does not address the specific needs of community radio stations. It is often focused on theory, and less on practical skills. Lastly, most training is provided in the capital, or even abroad, demanding travel, and language skills, as well as more time than many community stations have available.



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