COMMUNITY RADIO IN SOUTH ASIA– POTENTIAL FOR SHARING COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND CONNECTING PEOPLE

Community radio (CR) is a remarkable mass media that could give voice to the voiceless in rural and urban societies. In this blog Prof. WADP Wanigasundera and Mr MC Rasmin explore the current status of CR and its contribution to the development of the rural economy, largely based on their recent visits to several CR stations in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal.

COMMUNITY RADIO

If a radio promotes public participation and people's interest, informs the community, facilitates people in getting solutions to problems in their daily life, respects cultural diversity, includes women as key players, provides a voice against dictatorship, then it can be called a Community Radio (Vigil 1997). CR, as a local medium for community communication, can play multiple roles in driving social change. Its ability to produce programmes in local languages and its structural flexibility that allows the use of audience members as a key part of station management, programming and production, enables it to drive this change.

© Radio Sarabela 98.8 FM, Bangladesh

> **Box 1: Community Radio**
> Various scholars have tried to define CR in different ways. According to AMARC–Europe (1994) CR is a non-profit entity, which offers participatory opportunities and services to the community in which it is formed. CR provides accessibility to, and enhance, the participation of citizens in the community medium (Barlow 1988). CR is fundamentally differentiated bits: 'of the people, for the people, and by the people' format (Mtimde 2000; Tabing 2002). Jallov (2012) defined key aspects of community broadcasting as for, by, and of the community. It is the voice of the voiceless and a space for alternative political and socio-cultural thinking and action. Yet another feature that distinguishes CR from other kinds of media is its democratic nature. Barlow (1988) was of the view that it is different from commercial radio. Community involvement, non-profit nature and the democratic structure makes CR unique. It serves specific section of society known as a community (Kasoma 2002) and does not treat the audience as commercial objects, but as an integral part of the radio (Fraser and Estrada 2001). According to Howley (2005), Community Radio emerged as a response to the encroachment of global forces upon local cultural identities and socio-political autonomy.
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> Based on the location and service provided it is known by various names (Wilkins et al. 2014). In Latin America it is known as community, educational, and grassroots or civic radio. In Africa it is known as rural or bush radio. In some parts of Europe, it is called free radio (Jankowski 2002). In Australia it is known as public radio, and in the United States of America and many other countries it is known as community radio (Offor 2002). This indicates that CR is often conceptualized and perceived differently by different people in different parts of the world.

DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITY RADIO IN SOUTH ASIA

CR in the South Asian region evolved as a third sector to cater to the people who were widely excluded by the mainstream media and the people who were going through development challenges (Pavarala and Malik 2007; Girard 2001).

Nepal was the first country in South Asia to open its airwaves in 1997 for community and commercial broadcasters (Dahal and Aram 2011). Radio Sagarmatha was eventually licensed on 18 May 1997 and it began broadcasting on 22May 1997. It is the very first community radio in South Asia (Banjade 2007). Radio Sagarmatha set the standard for independent, public-interest radio in that country.

In India, the agenda of CR was mostly led by civil society organizations (CSO) and individual activists. There, the need for CR was realized in the absence of a space for community voices and fair representation for marginalized sections in the mainstream and state-owned media (Frederick, 2003). Though news and current affairs have been restricted by official policy, CR has been legally recognized as the third sector (Kapoor et al. 2017; Pavarala et al. 2011). In India, until late 2006, only educational institutions were allowed to set up campus radio stations having a transmission range of 10-15 km. The scope was only recently expanded to also include non-profit agencies, agricultural research institutes, and schools– these were allowed to set up community radio stations that would involve local communities in the content production process.

With regard to Bangladesh, Ganilo *et al*. (2016), believed that the advocacy for CR in Bangladesh was initiated in early 1998, but it took 10 years for CR to be legally recognized. At present, 17 CR stations are functioning in Bangladesh. In 2016, this number was 17 and the listenership was estimated to be 6.18 million (BNNRC 2016). Closely looking at the broader CR agenda, it mainly acts as catalyst to facilitate inclusive development and free flow of information. Bazlur Rahman, CEO of Bangladesh NGO Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC), claims CR, is trying to contribute to the achievement of the Five-Year Development Plan (2016-2020) of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB).

In a discussion with the volunteer team of Radio Gaibanda, Bangladesh

There's a long-existing debate among CR scholars in Sri Lanka and South Asia on the existence of Community Radio in Sri Lanka. A large volume of literature discusses this subject (Jayaratne et al. 2005; Rasmin 2011). In the very first decade (1979-1989) 'the famous' Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR) was initiated under the state broadcaster – Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) (Rasmin 2011). MCR was set up to facilitate socio-economic development of the people who became the settlers when Mahaweli Development Project implementation started in Sri Lanka. MCR during the 10 years of its operation played a significant role in empowering farmers by: providing timely agricultural information, offering a knowledge base, sharing local knowledge, bridging local farmers and agri-service delivery entities, shaping agricultural behaviors, providing knowledge and information about new technologies, and acting as an effective extension tool.

Role of Community Radio in social change

Community radio stations operate to provide social benefits, and they provide an open process for participation. CRs also make available a range of educational programmes, thus pushing for collective change. CRs serve as an expression of the community and it offers a voice for everyone in that society, including the marginalized. It offers a channel for the unheard to speak (Jallov 2012). It also enables action-oriented relationships and change (Mainali 2008). The communication process offered by the CR can lead to social change. It capacitates marginalized people to challenge poverty, includes multiple voices, promotes democratization, covers politically and socially important events, and helps to understand the community well. Being a transparent media, its benefits are accessible to various segments of communities (Box 2).

Mainali *et al.* (2009) noted that CR can be a key factor in fighting exclusion and marginalization, and this can be done by energizing community radio both in terms of content and access to radio management and technology use. Community radio is all about generating and sustaining social capital. Social capital is the ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups and organizations. In CR, community members are treated as participants and not as objects (Fraser and Estrada 2002).

Rural broadcasting for sharing information and connecting people

In the early 1980s the term 'rural broadcasting' usually referred to a division within the national broadcaster that produced programmes in the capital and broadcast them to the countryside. Now rural radio is 'local radio' (Girard 2001). Broadcasting that is inbuilt within the state system continues to remain all over the world and in Asia too. This type of broadcasting has always been more concerned about agricultural development broadly, and in addressing issues affecting farmers, providing timely and vital information, and connecting farmers and extension service providers.

Agriculture in general, and extension service in particular, has always been a highly knowledge-intensive sector requiring continuous information and a high level of connection between farmers and the service sector.

Farmers' quest for reliable, trustworthy and practical information – both from established systems and traditional practices – is ever increasing in this fluctuating global environment. The rapid changes happening due to urbanization, globalization, and technology development along with continuing farm crisis emphasize the need for timely, appropriate, and need-based information and knowledge that can help tackle the many developmental challenges.
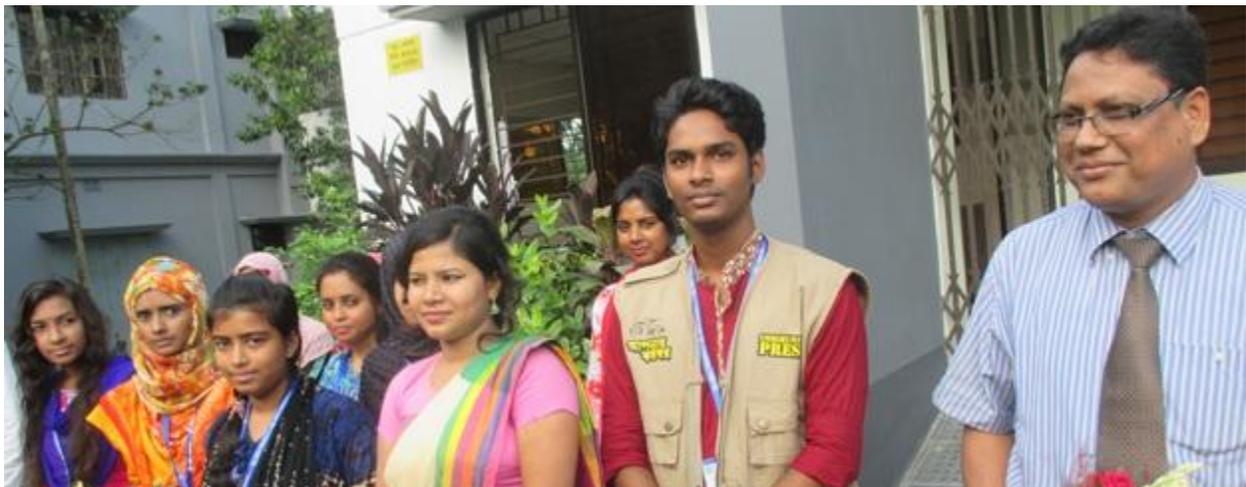
Young radio broadcasters at the radio Sarabela at Gaibandha, Bangladesh

Information is important for farmers so as to maintain livelihoods and to gain a competitive edge in a rapidly changing economic and production environment where traditional farming methods might be ineffective to meet new demands. Agricultural extension represents a mechanism by which information about new technologies, better farming practices, and better management can be transmitted to farmers. Reisenberg and Gor (1989) stated that extension services are experiencing a declining impact and more emphasis is being placed on the use of mass media for agricultural information transfer. Zijp (2003) observed that face-to-face communication between extension agents and farmers, while crucial, cannot fulfill all the farmers' information needs. Extension agents are too few in number and, particularly in emergency situations like those related to weather or a pest infestation, time is too short. As a result, radio has been recognized as a highly cost-effective technology to convey information, training, and technology in rural areas (Chapman et al. 2003).

Trends in South Asia

In South Asia there is a rich broadcasting culture to focus more on agricultural development. Broadcasting started in India in 1927 with the proliferation of private radio clubs. The operations of All India Radio (AIR) began formally in 1936, as a government organization, with clear objectives to inform, educate, and entertain the masses. Agricultural broadcasting has been one of the key areas of focus for AIR. Today, AIR has a network of 232 broadcasting centres with 149 medium frequency (MW), 54 high frequency (SW), and 171 FM transmitters. The coverage is 91.79% of the area, serving 99.14% of the people in the largest democracy of the world. AIR covers 24 languages and 146 dialects in home services. In external services, it covers 27 languages– 17 national and 10 foreign languages (http://agritech.tnau.ac.in/radio.html). Every regional radio station has its own agri-programme customized and relevant to the local content. AIR (now Prasar Bharathi) has been playing a significant role since many years in bringing new technological information on agriculture and other allied subjects to farmers.

At a meeting where the authors met the UNESCO Chair team (Prof. Vinod Pavarala, Prof. Kanchan Malik, Prof. Vasuki Belavadi, and Preeti Ragunath (PhD Scholar) attached to the University of Hyderabad, India.

With the recent liberalization of the broadcasting licensing policy, Community Radio has received a new impetus in India. This form of participatory communication has proved to be very successful as a tool for

social and economic development at the grassroots level. In Sri Lanka, a separate service – Farm Broadcasting – functions within the Department of Agriculture and works closely with state radio stations. The tie between the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation and the Department of Agriculture has resulted in several agricultural programs from the 1980s onwards. Farm broadcasting has been an integral part of Sri Lankan CR from the very beginning. India's post-independence experiments with ICT use in agricultural development started with radio.

Community Radio stations in Asia generally pay attention to agriculture-related programmes and providing information vital for farmers is one of the cross-cutting priorities. Some radio stations are completely dedicated to agriculture-related programs. Krishi FM in Nepal, the radio stations run by the– e-Radio Broadcasting Station of the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), in India, and Krishi Radio in Bangladesh play a dedicated role in extending radio broadcasting to farmers.

–e-Radio Broadcasting Station-India: When it comes to CR and sharing information with farmers in a timely manner, promising examples exist in Asia. The Tamil Nadu Agricultural University's (TNAU) –e-Radio Broadcasting Station can play a significant role in empowering people with information and in bridging the gap between rural people and knowledge sources. The present project is implemented by Media Lab Asia in collaboration with World Development Foundation, New Delhi, for TNAU, Coimbatore. The TNAU Community Radio Station with a coverage of 15 to 20 km, has an 'e' component feature in it, and hence the broadcast programme is integrated into the e-Extension network. Handling Community e-Radio is an interesting and creative task. All the three types of intelligence, viz., abstract, mechanical and social, are judiciously utilized in this ICT tool for making the programmes informative as well as interesting. The 50-watt broadcast is available in 22 villages falling within a distance of 20 km from the university. From 10-11 thousand people in this region can access the radio programmes produced by TNAU. General farmer information, success stories from farmers, and information from experts will be available for farmers.

Sangham Radio-India: Sangham Radio (SR) is a unique community radio experiment which is run by poor Dalit women from rural India. Sangham Radio was launched in 2008, with the support of Deccan Development Society (DDS). It is the first licensed community radio station in rural India. It helps through horizontal communication among their own communities as well as to take important issues to the outside world, to share their views and to find solutions. Listeners in villages about 30-40 km away from the station have also reported picking up the broadcast. Sangham reaches about 150 villages in Jarasangam, Zaheerabad and Raikod, and parts of Kohir and Nyalkal in the state of Telengana (india). The primary audience is rural women from marginalized groups, and its target is rural people in general.

Sangham Radio is an attempt to give poor and marginalized Dalit women a voice and a platform to share their views. In Sangham Radio, 95% of participation is by women. Women in farming, organic farming culture, and rural information play a prominent role in this radio. Pioneers of Sangham Radio set it up because they understood that local knowledge has not been utilized by mainstream media. Hence, illiterate but enthusiastic women's groups from the Dalit community challenged all these social knowledge spheres and created a new radio listening culture. And the role of Sangham Radio isn't limiting to just broadcasting radio programmes, they have already produced a number of short films on crop diversity, food and seed autonomy, making bio-fertilizers in the backyard, dangers of Bt Cotton, and so on. The women ideate, script, anchor, shoot, and edit their films while learning the finer aspects of filmmaking. These films that focus on development issues are screened at Sangham meetings, seminars, and film festivals.

Prof. Wanigasundera and Mr MC Rasmin conducted a meeting with the Sangham Radio team to learn about their operations.

Vayalaga Vanoli - India: In 2006, when the Indian government allowed NGOs and educational institutions to run community radio stations, Madurai District Tank Farmers Federation (MDTFF) successfully applied for a license. In 2011 it was assigned the frequency 90.4 MHz and started broadcasting from Kottampatti Village of Madurai District, Tamil Nadu, with a radius of 15 km. The FM airs nine hours of recorded programmes and three hours of live programmes covering agriculture-related tips, news, information on health, education, social affairs, weather reports, local employment opportunities, births, deaths, and special events. It also entertains villagers with cultural and music programmes. Four male and two female radio jockeys report from the field or broadcast the programmes from the studio. The station also makes use of local volunteers, while the information kiosk is in charge of community resource identification, programme recording and phone-in live programmes. The MDTFF executive committee, made up of 15 experienced member farmers, meets once a month to discuss and review the radio programmes. Vayalaga Vanoli reaches over 5000 farmers in100 villages of 27 Panchayats.

Krishi Radio-Bangladesh: Community Rural Radio Krishi Radio 98.8 is the only government community radio in Bangladesh, which was established by the Agricultural Information Service. The programmes of the radio are so popular that the listeners themselves have formed two listener group on their own initiative. The station receives a huge number of calls from listeners every day. Some community radios, as previously indicated, play remarkable radio programs on overall livelihood and agriculture development. In this case, ten officials and employees from the agricultural division have been working as full-time workers at the station. Moreover, 60 volunteers of the station are being trained by Network for Radio and Communication, a Bangladesh NGO, and some other organizations. Krishi Radio is now airing programmes between the hours of 9am to 11am and 3pm to 5pm. A news program, covering local, national and international news, is aired every day at 4pm. Farmers of the community are very upbeat about Krishi Radio, with one vegetable farmer saying that no one will be able to cheat them now, as they now know details of the daily market price through this radio.

With the slogan "My Radio, My Voice", Krishi Radio broadcasts a wide range of programmes in the local language of Barisali, a dlialet of Bengali language, which is commonly spoken by almost all the native peoples of Greater Barisal region (Barisal Division). Topics include: agriculture, fisheries, climate change, gender issues, livestock, disaster risk reduction, health, youth programmes, as well as local songs and

folk stories. To encourage community participation the programme "Listener's Letter" broadcasts criticisms and suggestions as received from letters sent by the audience. In addition to broadcasting, Krishi Radio also hosts a youth club to educate children about different issues and involve them in the production of radio programmes.

Checking out a field production process at the Radio Sarabela in Gaibanda office in Bangladesh

Krishi Community Radio – Nepal: Krishi Radio that broadcasts in 105 MHz is the first and the only agricultural radio in Nepal, and it was established in August 2009. It is a member of the radio network, ACORAB. It is managed by Dhunishebi Community Agricultural Communication Center, an NGO. Krishi Radio's primary purpose is to focus on technology adaptation and marketing in the Dhading district of Nepal. Along with the above-mentioned main objectives, the radio aims at inculcating a sense of pride in the small family farming community, attracting youth to the farming sector, making people aware of organic food, discouraging the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, providing agricultural knowledge, and also to bridge the gap between farmers and policy makers.

Community Radio Meghna in Bangladesh also provide farmer information. The radio is being run in Charfession upazila of Bhola district; a largest island in Bangladesh. It is is trying to empower the women specially the adolescents in the community. The dropped out adolescent girls of 12-18 years of age are the future mothers so if they are given proper education and awareness on reproductive health and hygiene along with skill training on different IGAs then they will be a productive force in the family. Moreover, an adolescent can bear the fruits of education throughout their remaining long life covering both her parental and conjugal family. Radio Meghna has special programs for them. In Bangladesh, Radio Sagar Dwip and Radio Jhenuk too produces programmes on issues affecting agriculture in.

Community Radio's contribution to agricultural development in South Asia

Close examination of a series of CRs in South Asia revealed that the majority of CRs has been supporting the rural agriculture sector. The leaders – both officials and community members – who are responsible

for the CR has shown a great deal of dedication in serving the community through the programmes. Some of the innovative approaches the authors came across are discussed below.

a. **Farmer gathering** - Radio Krishi in Nepal has this innovative programme called 'Farmer Gathering'. Krishi plays the role of a community mobilizer and bridge builder. In this gathering, farmers from a selected village come together and discuss existing challenges as well as likely future challenges affecting farmers, and then facilitated by the radio producer, they discuss potential solutions. In this participatory manner, new farming practices, rural innovations, and best practices are shared by the people. Some farmers bring their questions and clarifications to be posted by the radio producers. Radio producers map out the issues, record the inputs shared by the farmers, and produce a series of informative programmes in turn. In these programmes, the producers invite extension officers, farmer leaders, government representatives and other experts to address the queries collected from the Farmer Gathering. Radio, in this context, plays a bridge building role.

In Nepal the writers met with community radio managers, Mr.Saroj Faudel (first from left), and Mr. Baktha (second from left)

b. **Authentic local knowledge from local people** - Popular media often deny or exclude local knowledge. CR in South Asia has a long history of mobilizing and providing a space for local knowledge from local people. MCR Radio followed a special strategy in which it located rural knowledge bases, identified people who have vital local knowledge on farming practices, and provided a space for farmer leaders to disseminate their extensive local knowledge. Similarly, the staff of Vayalaga Vanoli in India collects ideas, suggestions and requests directly from farmers in the field, and broadcast daily programmes on agriculture, animal husbandry, health, women and education. The key achievements of this radio include: building local knowledge on droughts and floods and generating coping strategies arising from community expertise/experience; facilitating knowledge sharing in agriculture based on practices; raising awareness on education, health, gender, rights, agriculture, traditional knowledge, information and communication technology for development; providing a space for community participation and debate; and identifying and showcasing local talents.

c. **Building bridges** - The major strength of CR is its local nature, low-cost operation and ability to reach local authorities. Indian CR Amara MSPICM produce programmes providing updated information to farmers and connect farmers with local authorities. Historically radios, like MCR, have raised up the voice of farmers, and made authorities responsible. Similarly, CR Amara MSPICM has always build a bridge between farmers and concerned authorities in several ways. Radio SSM facilitates a process

whereby farmers get their crops insured. Radio Bundelkhand's programme concentrates on building resilient community ecosystems. This Radio promotes local talent and uses local art and culture as an effective way for communicating information.

d. **Audio visual treatments** - One of the innovative methods used by Sangham Radio in India is to produce audio visual materials in addition to the regular radio programmes. They do this to explain vital information to farmers in an interactive manner. Such practices are commonly observed in the community radios run by agricultural NGOs and government-run media institutes. Kisan-Vani, in Madhya Pradesh, provides skills needed for the farmers on livelihood. One example is of professional agriculturists invited by this Radio to discuss future issues that could possibly harm the upcoming harvest. One thing observed was that radios' listenership is increasingly threatened due to the domination of popular media. In this context, it must be noted that in most of the South Asian countries people choose television and web media for their information and knowledge needs. In such a context, it is vital that radio is placed on an audio-visual platform.

e. **Addressing human rights concerns:** CR in general, being a community-based media, has the potential to address genuine concerns of the farming communities. It is possible mainly because CR provides easy access to people in the target villages. MCR Radio, which despite being owned by the government, raised the issues of affected newly settled farmers. David (2008) firmly believed that MCR Radio played a significant role in addressing issues affecting the rights of farmers. He observed that CR has extensive ability to sense the frustration of farmers.

    In Bangladesh Radio, Sarabela (situated in Gaibandha's districts) produced creative programmes to address poverty issues. Addressing all forms of poverty, discrimination and injustice in the marginalized communities is the larger goal of this Radio. It works together with rural and char community of the Gaibandha districts and produce programmmes on the educational, social, economic and cultural life of the disadvantaged. There are many perennial islands, called 'Char' in the Jamuna River. People in Char areas suffer from perennial natural disasters being deprived of basic human needs such as health, education, communication and information services. Now the rural and marginalized community people of Gaibandha district have direct access to discuss their own issues through Community Radio Sarabela 98.8.

CONCLUSION

There are several innovative CR and similar radio programme models exist in each of the countries studied. Given the innovative models available, it is important to assemble an account of such innovative programme models for the benefit of the whole sector. Community Radios operating in South Asia have proved their high potential to exchange timely, vital information to the farming community, and thus empower farmers with necessary local knowledge. A mechanism is therefore needed to share the experience of different models so as to enable local communities to benefit from them.

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Prof. W A D P Wanigasunndera is attached to the Department of Agric. Extension, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka and Mr MC Rasmin is a PhD Scholar at the Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati, India.