Generally speaking, to promote communication in Africa also means giving the remote, marginalised, rural communities the means to participate in national development through knowledge and information. This could be done through promoting public, decentralised, free and independent community media. The idea of creating appropriate community media (rural newspapers, rural educational radio, television clubs or schools television) for the exclusive benefit of people in the remotest parts of the country stemmed from the acknowledgement in the 1960s that there was a huge disparity in information and communication between towns and villages.

The purpose of a good communication policy should be to ensure that the same quantitative and qualitative information is available for the whole population of a given country. Yet, in West Africa, at the dawn of independence, urban-dwellers were ‘over-informed’ through the infrastructure of mass media whereas rural people were ‘under-informed’. African villagers do not read newspapers; they do not watch television and cannot go to the cinema; they do not have telematics, videos or telephones and hardly listen to radio broadcasts.

Out of the about 80 million people in French-speaking West Africa (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea Conakry, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo), 64 mil-
lion individuals are unable to receive information, education or entertainment through the modern means of mass communication. They are disadvantaged regarding instructional materials and awareness of the rest of the world as technologies and the infrastructure of mass media are almost exclusively in urban areas. These generate in the urban dwellers an innovative spirit and an aspiration towards a higher cultural level, adaptation to change, motivation and progress for modernity, all of which are deemed necessary elements for sustainable socio-economic development. On the other hand, the lack of such infrastructure in rural areas considerably retards their social and economic development.

Experiences of Community Media in French-speaking West Africa

For more than 20 years after the independence of African countries in the 1960s, West African governments continued communicating in a vertical and authoritative manner to the rural areas (80% of inhabitants) through the monopoly of state media. Decentralisation in the form of radio clubs or rural printing presses took place. However, this was not sufficient to make communication with rural communities more interactive. In the mid-1980s, new types of more dynamic local and community media appeared in rural areas with the principal purpose of finding out and establishing a communication of proximity which reflected the socio-economic, cultural and linguistic needs and realities of rural communities. The general objectives of these community media were to:

1. promote dialogue and popular participation in the communities and the exchange of information, knowledge and techniques among these communities;
2. enable all those who wished to broadcast information or to introduce innovations into the different sectors of rural development to have social and educational communication instruments at their disposal; and
3. provide all parties in the rural world with training, information and communication based on strategies of dialogue, unity and participation rather than a vertical flow of messages.

In many countries, only associations, groupings or communities can operate an associative or community radio or private, local and non-commercial community
television station. These enterprises must broadcast programmes dealing with the real concerns of the local people to help them improve their living conditions. Their programmes must contribute to the information, education, entertainment of the public, local animation, development of education, national cultural heritage, promotion of songs and music. Non-commercial associative or community radio organisations can produce and transmit information with a historical, economical, social, cultural, scientific, technical and sport content in a given, definite zone. In some countries such as Burkina Faso, no political party is permitted to use a proximity radio, either directly or through an intermediary.

Community media are generally created by the initiative of internal actors (the government, or private economic enterprises) and external (foreign) partners. Their objectives are generally to support the philosophy of their creators, to inform and educate communities (young girls, women, farmers) and to promote national development. The print media generally support post-literacy activities and the promotion of newspapers in national languages. The rural press has experienced a chequered development in the past two decades with either a slow development, as in Togo, or a more considerable growth, as in Burkina Faso. In most of the countries, rural newspapers have disappeared and projects for a community press have floundered.

In French-speaking West Africa, the first private local radio station was born in Burkina Faso in 1986. Mr Moustapha Thiombiano, on his return from Europe and America where he had been deeply influenced by the experience of private media, created Horizon FM which is now operating in 10 localities of Burkina Faso. However, the real boom in the development of private local radio stations started after the speech by President François Mitterrand at the La Baule Francophone Summit in June 1990 and with the process of democratisation since 1991.

With the explosion of private media, the governments in the different countries have established the following regulating bodies for the media: in Benin, the Higher Authority for Audio-visual and Communication (HAAC); Burkina Faso, the Higher Information Council (CSI); Cameroon, the National Communication Council (CNC); Chad, the Higher Communication Council (HCC); Côte d’Ivoire, the National Council for Audio-visual Communication (CNCA); Gabon, the National Communication Council (CNC); Guinea-Conakry, the National Communication Council (CNC); Mali, the Higher
Communication Council (CSC); Niger, the Higher Communication Council (CSC); Senegal, the Higher Communication Council (HCC); Togo, the Higher Audio-visual and Communication Authority (HAAC).\textsuperscript{2} The tasks of these bodies are to oversee the legislation and information ethics in force, to guarantee a regular exercise of the concerned professions, and ensure a balance of information in the programmes of public press corporations and enterprises working in audio-visual communication.\textsuperscript{3}

In the 1960s and 1970s, governments in French-speaking West African countries were not particularly concerned about informing and educating the rural populations through community information structures. Governments created all kinds of media structures under their own exclusive control: radio-clubs (Togo, Niger); rural education radios (Senegal, Guinea-Conakry); rural radios (Benin, Burkina Faso); TV-clubs (Senegal); schools television (Côte d’Ivoire); rural printing presses (Mali); and community presses (Mali, Togo). Unfortunately, this form of institutional communication for development has remained centred on broadcasting messages and instructions to rural communities rather than taking into account their needs and aspirations to enable a true dialogue.

\textbf{The Functioning of Community Media}

\textit{Radio:} Community radios are increasingly reaching out to the various prefectures and provinces in French-speaking West Africa (2 to 19\% of the territory). Out of a population of about 80 million inhabitants, specialists consider that community radios reach about 1.6 million people a day, that is to say, about one-fifth of the total population.

The equipment available in community radio stations is generally composed of radio transmitters with an average capacity of between 500 and 2,500 watts with some functional technical material. The personnel are either permanent or contractual. The permanent staff account for between four and ten persons at each station, with an undetermined number of volunteers hired according to linguistic criteria and their skills in radio animation. An overview of the situation of radio is as follows:
1. national, regional and provincial radio stations;
2. local radios set up with state assistance and run by village communities;
3. associative radios often established in rural areas by village associations and NGOs;
4. religious radios established in urban centres; and
5. private commercial radios established in urban centres.

*Print:* Print runs of the community press are usually insignificant. For example, in the case of Burkina Faso which is one of the best developed countries in terms of community newspaper publications, the AEPJLN⁴ deems that the average print run amounts to 17,642 copies a month, for a population estimated at 10.3 million inhabitants by INSD⁵, that is to say, there is one newspaper for 585 people per month. The press uses old fashioned equipment, old printing machinery and insufficient human resources, who are poorly paid and do not have the appropriate professional skills. The community print media mainly use national languages and contain news items and information dealing with health, agriculture, education, women, young people, game-contests, economy, music, and sports.

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**Difficulties Encountered by Community Media**

A number of factors hinder the functioning of community media. The main funding sources for community media, such as community printing presses, local proximity radio, rural education radio, television clubs, are the development partners of UNESCO, Germany, FAO, UNICEF, ACCT, Canada and Switzerland. After many years of assistance, community media are expected to ensure their own resources and survival. It is at that moment that funding is sought from five other sources: NGOs (national and international), the State, the communities themselves, voluntary contributions, and community media self-generated resources.

Some newspapers are funded from 80 to 90% by NGOs. The State contribution for some others range between 2.5 and 40%. Communities themselves generally contribute between 10 and 30%, while individual voluntary contributions range from 3 to 20% and the share of resources generated by newspapers themselves is between 3 and 10%. For private associative or community radio the
average funding percentages received from the five sources are as follows: NGOs 40%; communities 30%; generated resources 15%; State 10%; and individuals 5%.

Many other problems impede the development of community media. These include collecting and treating information in a non-professional way, the management of community media and the training of personnel. There are difficulties in gathering information and in assuring the regular printing and distribution of newspapers. In addition, with high levels of illiteracy there is an absence of a reading culture. Dependency on foreign partners, low State support and poverty within the communities as well as lack of equipment and spare parts, problems of maintenance and the high price of printing materials, are further impediments.

To resolve these problems which hinder the functioning of community media, the following solutions are suggested:
1. ensure training in management and administration of media;
2. equip sites with sustainable material (televisions, video cassette recorders, reportage gears);
3. promote self-funding and autonomy;
4. solve the illiteracy problem and develop post-literacy activities;
5. create an information environment which allows farmers to be constantly in touch with facts;
6. train leaders and editors of newspapers in national languages in the gathering and treatment of information;
7. improve the presentation quality of newspapers written in national languages;
8. master newspaper distribution methods;
9. provide technical support to the press;
10. effectively involve communities in the operations of the media; and
11. promote the use of solar power.

Generally speaking, it can be observed that community media have not really developed as might have been expected following the general enthusiasm of the 1960s. They still operate with obsolete equipment, poorly trained personnel and ever diminishing funding sources, which result in newspaper titles that fre-
quently disappear and amateurish local radio stations. No self-financing projects are being undertaken. Some media, like radio-clubs and schools television, have experienced severe failures so that today, despite the rhetoric that they are useful and indispensable in rural areas, very little public or private investment is being made for their improvement. This is all the more regrettable as research has shown that community media are important and useful in rural areas.

**Technologies used in Rural Communities**

A number of community media technologies, modern as well as traditional, are used in rural communities in West Africa.

**Audio-visual Media**

The first and most widespread technology is rural radio broadcasting which is the preferred instrument of providing information and education in rural communities by reason of its technical qualities. It reaches a wide public, literate as well as illiterate. It is easy to run, is not confined in space, is readily accessible, permits collective listening and is very well adapted to the African oral culture. It is known under different names: radio-clubs, rural radio, community radio, and private local radio. Its objective is to favour the communication of proximity, taking into account the needs, socio-cultural, linguistic and economic realities of rural communities. Through its programmes, it provides the information and technical knowledge which the population needs in the multiple domains of national development: agriculture, health, education, economy, environment and population. Successful experiments in the use of this technology have been undertaken in Senegal, Guinea Conakry, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire and Cameroon.

Picture boxes, transparencies and slides are of current use in rural areas, notably in community media programmes. They are easy to manipulate, they give rise to interactive discussions among the audience and the objectives of social, educational and information communication are perfectly fulfilled. A number of interventions are being carried out in rural areas with the help of this communication technology.

Television is a useful instrument in education and training. In the 1970s most countries used it. Unfortunately, it was abandoned as a means of access to knowledge.
and training, especially for the elimination of illiteracy among the rural population. It is desirable that it becomes, in the rural areas, an instrument of culture and education and provides training for community media professionals in audio-visual communication techniques.

The cinematographic camera is used regularly to film rural lives for commercial productions such as the numerous African films shown, every two years, during the Pan African Festival of Cinema and Film Makers of Ouagadougou (FESPACO). However, the camera is not a technology used in the service of African rural communities. The equipment, production materials, training, and distribution are rather expensive. For this reason also there are not many cinema halls in the rural areas. Nevertheless, it should be noted that ‘cinebus’ and ‘video-info’ vehicles go round the rural areas of some West African countries to show educational films and those of national concern.

Video is often used in rural areas. It provides opportunities for exchange and interaction among the community members. A video tape recorder and a cassette are all that are needed for a video forum session. It is an accessible technology and of practical use.

**Community Printing Press**

Since the birth of the political democratisation process in Africa in the late 1980s, there has been a rapid growth in the use of the private printing press in urban and peri-urban communities, though use of the community press in French and national languages has not seen the same growth. The community press is suitable for decentralised communication, and for dynamic exchanges between communities and decision-makers. It generally treats specialised topics of information, culture, education, health and agriculture. In countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, the community press has greatly improved. But on the whole, the situation is far from healthy. Production of articles in national languages poses technical problems. The journalists are mostly amateurs, without any professional training. The installations, infrastructure, equipment and materials are obsolete and the circulation is usually only between 5,000 and 20,000 copies.
Printing on paper or on cloth has appeared in rural communities as a medium of information and training. Photographs and posters which are accessible technologies and less expensive are considered ‘cold’ in that it is not always easy for communities to understand the message of a photo or a poster. Printing on cloth and on T-shirts is easily done and easily incorporated into the life of the population as they can carry messages and information about facts and events.

**Traditional Community Media**

In the social communication system aimed at establishing a permanent and true dialogue among the actors of national development, traditional media play a major role in rural communities using popular theatre, plays, songs, stories/riddles/proverbs. These have proved their capacity to transmit persuasive messages to significant numbers of people.

Theatres and plays are much used as community media because in African societies, drama is a powerful instrument of sensitisation and education. It attracts people’s attention and can develop and transmit educational messages and present a kind of technology which conforms with the socio-educational interactive nature of communication of the area. Role plays are participatory and use dynamic scenic techniques in rural areas. They permit group discussions. The communities possess, in this technology, an effective means of sensitisation, being inexpensive, easy to use and very practical. Puppet theatres can be compared to the theatre, the difference being that the puppets do not speak and there is no interactivity, since the public cannot replace the comedians on the stage. The puppet theatres of Mali, Togo, Benin and Guinea Conakry are famous for their art of popular education.

Songs and folklore are also powerful carriers of messages in communities. They are part of the oral tradition and a powerful means for mobilising communities. They are the most popular community media in West Africa. The concept of *Du NKU*®️, village persuaders, which has been tried in a number of villages in French-speaking West Africa, uses songs as one of the techniques of sensitisation and education. Stories, riddles and proverbs are accessible traditional media, practical and easy to use during gatherings or through modern media. There is no specific training needed to understand them. They are used
to instruct and educate through symbols, giving a real existence to beings, things, sentiments, and events. Communication, information and education through stories, riddles and proverbs are very fundamental in rural areas.

**Community Media Promotion Policies**

There is no distinct, clear and coherent policy of community media promotion in the countries of French-speaking West Africa. Between 1964 and 1976, all of them created structures for radio clubs, rural radio, rural printing presses, schools television with the aid of external partners. Since then, things have not changed much, in spite of the numerous political declarations of intent, and the United Nations General Assembly resolution, adopted in November 1996. This resolution underlined the key role of communication for development as an instrument of dialogue between the citizen and the public powers and encouraged planners and decision makers at all levels to include a ‘communication’ component in their development programmes and projects. At the moment, Mali is the only country to have a national policy of communication for development where community media are specifically mentioned. Other countries like Senegal, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Benin are preparing such policies. Almost all French-speaking West African countries have organised general overviews of the communication situation and have consequently developed programmes for political orientation and communication. But in the context of an independent and pluralistic press and free democratic expression, community media are not well considered and supported.

To redress this situation, it is therefore recommended that:

1. the State be more actively involved in the policy of development;
2. the government take measures to promote community media development;
3. general overviews of the situation of community media be undertaken;
4. the status of community media journalists be defined; and
5. the State provide financial and technical support to communities which wish to create and run their own community media with the view to favouring the exchange of information, knowledge and techniques among themselves.
Training and research are indispensable for community media development. The issue of training is of primary importance. It should concern both traditional and modern techniques and practices of communication and take place at local, national or sub-regional levels. At present, the most important institutions for training communication practitioners are established in Abidjan, Cotonou, Dakar, Kinshasa, Niamey, Ouagadougou and Yaoundé. However, none of these has programmes specifically to train communicators and producers in community media. The African Centre of Studies in Rural Radio of Ouagadougou (CIER-RO) created by URTNA in 1978 for French-speaking countries, is the only institute which trains producers and technicians specifically in rural radio. Those who organise and stimulate community media are, in the majority of cases, brave amateurs, although the main role of communicators and educators that they play necessitates a solid professional training. This training should encompass: the dissemination of scientific and technical information; the production of newspapers, brochures, photos, TV/radio programmes, films, transparencies, slides, audio visual cassettes, etc.; knowledge of interpersonal, social, educational, informational, institutional communication techniques and strategies; and acquiring skills in the maintenance of community media equipment.

Most community media journalists and producers enter the profession through enthusiasm or passion without really knowing the practices, techniques, laws, rules and demands of the profession. For that reason, there are several shortcomings in the exercise of the profession which engender arrests and legal proceedings harmful to the reliability and credibility of community media. All these weaknesses do irreparable harm to community media. To solve this problem, the following recommendations are made to African governments, training institutions, and media organisations:

1. the creation of a national or sub-regional structure for training community media specialists;
2. the creation of community media to be preceded by the training of responsible persons, administrators, journalists, producers, animators, and technicians;
3. the regular organisation of workshops and courses for retraining of community media staff; and
4. the incorporation of community media courses in the programmes of communication training institutions.

The question of research in community media is also of prime importance as it would allow better knowledge of community media and the impact they produce on the communities and the development of more interactive, participatory, and interesting, productions. Research would also assist in the identification of the most appropriate technologies, infrastructure and communication equipment for the communities.

**Recommendations**

The following general recommendations are made to promote the development of community media in French-speaking West Africa:

1. *Judicial and institutional plans*: the creation of a national structure for elaborating a national policy of communication development; the creation of an observatory of community media (policies, programmes); and community media to be considered as a priority preoccupation of governments;

2. *Infrastructure, equipment and choices of technology*: the authorisation and creation of community media in each prefecture or province of the country; use of solar energy in the areas without electricity and where community media are installed; development of rural telephony; appropriate choices of equipment or technology; and setting up of a distribution network for community newspapers;

3. *Training*: creation of a structure for the training and regular retraining of staff and specialists of community media; organisation of a series of training programmes especially for communicators and key educators who are the community village persuaders; integration of community media courses in regular communication training programmes;

4. *Research*: research into apprenticeship strategies in rural areas; study of communicators and key educators in rural areas; development of survey instruments for assessing the characteristics of the rural audience and for measuring the impact of programmes; and studying the combination of new technologies and traditional community media.
Conclusion

Undoubtedly, community media play very useful roles in rural communities. By their proximity, they allow local communities to express themselves, to be informed, to get educated and to amuse themselves, purposes which the media in urban areas of French-speaking West Africa do not necessarily fulfill. By the content and form of their programmes in health, agriculture, education, economy, environment, population, culture, music, sports, news items, columns for women, young people, they present information and messages of relevance to the communities. But community media cannot play their role effectively without better expressed political will and support. The same should be apparent in initiatives and actions which result in investment in community media enterprises, the use of more appropriate media technologies, the training of personnel and local communities and a permanent research plan.

Notes

1. Order N° 98-030/CSI/CAB relating to the obligations and mission of community or associative private radiocast sound companies, Burkina Faso.
6. The concept of “DU NKU” was devised, elaborated, researched and tested in the field by Yao Ahade.