

Regional Seminar on Promoting Community Media in Africa: Synthesis, Proceedings and Recommendations

Uganda National Commission for UNESCO
Kampala, Uganda

I. Introduction

1. The Regional Seminar on Promoting Community Media in Africa, organised on 7-9 June 1999 in Kampala, Uganda, was attended by about 100 participants and observers from 15 African countries, as well as from Europe, Asia and the Caribbean.

II. The Opening Session

2. The seminar was opened by the Commissioner for Information in the Department of Information, Office of the President, Dr. J. P. Okullu-Mura, who welcomed participants, especially those local participants from up-country and those from outside Uganda. In her introductory remarks, Ms. A. Nakkazi, Secretary General of the Uganda National Commission for UNESCO, expressed the pleasure of hosting the regional seminar, noting that, at the local level, Uganda was implementing policies which require adequate dissemination of information throughout the country. She mentioned in particular the multi-purpose community tele-centre project in Nakaseke in the Luweero district being implemented with

UNESCO support within the context of the African Information Society Initiative and the UN System-wide Special Initiative for Africa.

3. The UNESCO Regional Adviser for Communication in East Africa, Mr. Alonso Aznar, set the context of the Kampala seminar as part of the follow-up of the Seminar on Promoting an Independent and Pluralist Press in Africa which took place in Windhoek in May 1991 and the new communication strategy of UNESCO. He said that the lack of political support for community media, coupled with media privatisation and commercialisation had resulted in communities being marginalised. Although governments may claim to support pluralistic and independent media, those holding political and economic power benefited from media liberalisation, and community media lack the economic, technical and human resources needed to sustain them. He stressed that communities should have the means to articulate their needs and control their own messages. Mr. Aznar proposed that the media and communities should create a synergy to find effective solutions to development needs. In addition, women's groups need to become more central in community media. He hoped that the seminar's deliberations and recommendations would provide a pattern for an integrated approach to developing the voices of the different communities.

4. In his welcoming remarks, Dr. Kwame Boafo of the Communication Division, UNESCO, Paris, said the purpose of the seminar was to provide a forum for the discussion and formulation of strategies for promoting and enhancing the development of community media in African countries. He expressed the hope that participants would make recommendations on issues of policies and legislation, strategies for funding, appropriate communication technologies, content, programming, training and research. He said that the importance of the seminar resided in the priority given by UNESCO, in its communication strategy and programme in Africa, to encourage and support the development of media which help to expand access to news and information and provide more opportunities for communities to express themselves.

5. Dr. Boafo thanked the Uganda National Commission for UNESCO for its collaboration in organising the seminar and the Ford Foundation Lagos Office, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation Harare Office, Oxfam Canada Country Office in Addis Ababa, and the Communication Assistance Foundation of the Netherlands for supporting the participation of a number of people.

6. The acting UNDP Resident Representative, Dr. Eugene Owusu, said in his opening statement that information was the lifeline of a vibrant civil society. He observed that effective information flows were necessary for sound decision-making, for nurturing social capital and building the capacity of civil society to hold leaders accountable. He stressed that people were not mere recipients of information and that, with the policy of decentralisation, both modern and traditional participatory communication methods could be developed to meet the needs of different social groups, particularly the disadvantaged and marginalised. Dr. Owusu noted that strategies for developing community media must be linked with other on-going development activities supported by NGOs, development agencies and the private sector.

7. Following these welcoming remarks and statements, Prof. Alfred E. Opubor of the New Africa International Network, Harare, Zimbabwe, gave the keynote address: “If community media is the answer, what is the question?” He stressed the importance of community media in African countries and the need to understand a community through its communication system as “a community creates and is also created by the community communication system”. He called for ethnographic communication research and needs assessment as necessary stages in developing community media. The research should address such questions as: which media already exist in the community?; which media are needed or wanted by the community?; which media can the community afford?; and what kinds of media channels or combinations would meet the community’s needs? The answers to these questions, based on participatory research, would help to understand the community from the ‘inside out’ rather than the ‘outside in’.

8. Prof. Opubor provided some suggestions and directions for discussion on issues such as policy and regulation of community media, their ownership and control, technical operations, programme content and sustainability.

9. Mr. Gabindadde Musoke, Permanent Secretary in the Office of the President of Uganda, read the opening speech on behalf of the Hon. Basoga Nsadhu, the Minister of Information, Office of the President. In this speech, the Minister thanked UNESCO for its decision to organise the seminar in Kampala and highlighted the importance of the media in the implementation of development programmes. He called for the formulation of communication policies and media

strategies which would enable marginalised groups to participate in sharing ideas, developing knowledge and making decisions through appropriate and affordable media. Hon. Mr. Nsadhu noted that the role of community media included: (i) empowering people to participate in the search for solutions to problems as perceived and defined by them; (ii) helping to eradicate poverty and supporting conflict resolution; (iii) promoting sustainable development; and (vi) promoting traditional media and preserving cultures.

10. After the Permanent Secretary had declared the seminar open, the following participants were elected as officials of the seminar: Chairperson, Dr. J. P. Okullumura (Uganda); Vice-chairpersons, Ms. Jennifer Sibanda (Zimbabwe) and Mr. Sékou Abdoul Cissé (Mali); Rapporteur, Ms. Marion Kyomuhendo (Uganda); Co-rapporteurs, Mr. Faustin J. Misavu (Uganda) and Mr. Akin Akingbulu (Nigeria).

III. Presentation and Discussion of the Background Papers

11. Five papers on the development of community media in different regions were presented to provide a background for the deliberations. Three of the papers discussed the development of community media in East and Southern Africa, English-speaking West Africa and French-speaking West Africa. The other two described the experiences in South East Asia and the Caribbean.

12. After the presentation of the background papers, the participants raised a number of issues and questions in the discussions which ensued. Some participants wondered how community media would be able to influence policy at the national level and how NGOs operating community media in the region were coping with the issue of financial sustainability. A number of questions were raised about the Internet, the role of volunteers in community media operations, the situation in countries where private radio broadcasting was not yet allowed, and comparison of the countries in the different regions in Africa in terms of progress made on developing community media.

13. Most participants noted that sustainability was a major concern for all community media and examples of resource mobilisation were cited such as establishing a local language newspaper, some setting up local NGOs, encouraging income gener-

ating activities, and obtaining advertising revenues at concessional rates. Appropriate technology and equipment was seen as essential, as was the need to actually ask communities about the type of media and technology they would like and would be able to manage and maintain. Involvement of community members was stressed, especially as concerns the content of messages and information. “People should not only have access to information or the means of communication but be enabled to go beyond that to interpret and understand it,” one participant observed.

14. As many community media survive through different people volunteering their time and energy, and whatever skills they can contribute, it was emphasised that volunteerism should not be abused but negotiated. The criteria for voluntary contributions should be assessed in terms of personalities and disciplines and not qualifications. To make their experiences worthwhile, the volunteers need to be empowered, and, to ensure satisfaction and standards they can sometimes be offered a freelance contract.

15. It was observed that in many countries, governments were the licensing bodies, but few have had a policy or regulatory framework specific to community media. In some instances, the government may not agree with community media, especially where community media work to empower and give a voice to the voiceless.

16. A number of participants remarked that the definition of ‘community media’ required further analysis, with a need to distinguish between ‘community-oriented media’ and ‘community media’. It was also stressed audience and impact research were crucial but should be carried out with participatory methods so as to help in monitoring and evaluation as well as re-orienting policies in the local communities. In addition, the community should always get feedback from the results of research.

IV. Presentation and Discussion of the Case Studies

17. In addition to the five background papers, four case studies of country-specific experiences in developing community media in Africa were presented and discussed. The studies dealt with development of community media in Uganda, Mali, South Africa and the Development through Radio (DTR) project in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

18. The discussions and reactions to the case studies raised several fundamental issues. Financial sustainability was identified as a major problem, particularly since many of the targeted rural communities were relatively disadvantaged and marginalised and marketing and advertising were difficult to secure in rural resource-poor areas. It was observed that the language to be used; the format and relevance of the messages; the levels of education; and cultural values of the community were all issues to be considered in preparing the content of a particular community radio programme. The importance of research, monitoring and evaluation, including the assessment of equipment needs and technology, was again stressed, but there were questions about the affordability of research.

V. Recommendations

19. Following the presentations and discussions of the background papers and case studies in plenary sessions, the seminar participants were divided into three working groups to examine and make recommendations on several aspects of promoting community media in Africa. Working Group 1 focused on policies, legislation and strategies for funding. Working Group 2 considered appropriate communication and information technologies and Working Group 3 examined content/programming, training and research. The reports of the Working Groups were presented and discussed in the final plenary session during which the following recommendations were approved:

1. Communication Policies

That information and communication policies formulated in African countries recognise the importance of community media as distinct institutions for development, free speech and cultural expression.

2. Legislation

That African countries set up independent regulatory bodies to regulate public, private and commercial broadcasting. That for such bodies to be effective, they

should represent different interest groups in the society and be accountable to parliament and not governments.

That international organisations such as UNESCO support African countries to draw up an inventory of existing media laws and regulations.

3. Strategies for Funding

That African communities and governments be encouraged to contribute resources for developing community media and that donor agencies consider providing funds for advocacy activities promoting community media development in Africa.

That community media practitioners in each country set up community media associations for collective action, especially for lobbying national authorities and seeking donor support.

That international organisations encourage the creation of independent endowment funds, with contributions from inter-governmental bodies, donor agencies, and the private sector for the development of community media in Africa.

4. Communication Technologies and Approaches

That organisations and individuals setting up community media should involve community members in determining the kind of communication technologies which are appropriate to use and that such technologies should be compatible with the environment and respond to the needs of the community.

That community media practitioners integrate traditional media that exist in the communities with modern media to ensure an effective media mix in the dissemination of news and information.

That Uganda consider creating, with support from international organisations, a Web site for sharing and exchanging information on issues dealing with community media in Africa.

That African countries give priority to the electrification of rural areas to facilitate the creation of community media.

5. *Contents and Programming*

That the content and programmes of community media deal with issues affecting most African countries such as conflict resolution and prevention, culture, environment, human rights, gender, health, civic education, ethics and values, economic development and non-formal education.

That participatory methods be used in producing the content and programmes of community media that reflect the interests of various social groups, especially youth, women and children.

6. *Training*

That African countries, with support from the international community, set up a task force to examine the training needs for community media and draw up the relevant curriculum and that there should be a gender balance in all community media training activities.

That international organisations and donor agencies encourage and support exchange and study visits to enable community media practitioners to share experiences and information.

7. *Research*

That organisations and individuals planning to create community media carry out baseline studies of the communities' communication systems, needs, and resources, using participatory research methods.

That community media practitioners undertake regular studies to assess the impact of their programmes and productions and provide feedback from the studies to the communities as well as use the findings to improve the quality of their programmes.

VI. The Closing Session

20. In the closing session of the seminar, the Chairperson, Dr. J.P. Okullu-Mura, provided a brief summary of the proceedings to the Hon. Thomas Kiryapawo, Minister of State for Gender, Labour and Social Development. He then requested the rapporteur, Ms. Marion Kyomuhendo, to read out the set of recommendations which had been approved by the seminar participants.

21. Both Mr. Alonso Aznar, UNESCO Regional Adviser for Communication in East Africa, and Dr. Kwame Boafo of the Communication Division, UNESCO Paris, gave brief closing remarks, after which the Chairperson invited the Hon. Thomas Kiryapawo to address and close the seminar.

22. The Hon. Mr. Kiryapawo expressed the appreciation of the Government and people of Uganda for hosting the seminar. Acknowledging the paramount importance of information in all development strategies and activities, he criticised the centralised government media systems which were nothing more than “the few talking to the many about the needs and problems of the many from the standpoint of the few”. He noted that community media offer a harmonious mix of modern and traditional media, facilitate dialogue between rural communities and policy makers and serve as instruments for enhancing social integration. “It is my conviction that, with access to community media, our communities, each in its own right, will acquire the necessary impetus to engage in a dialogue about the common development problems on a more equal footing”, he observed.

23. The Hon. Mr. Kiryapawo expressed appreciation for UNESCO’s initiative in promoting the development of community media in Africa and thanked the Organization for spear-heading the rethinking of strategies to reach the disadvantaged and marginalised through community media. He then declared the seminar on promoting community media in Africa to be closed and presented certificates of participation to all the participants and seminar organisers.

24. Ms. Wilna Quarmyne of the Ghana Community Broadcasting Services gave a vote of thanks to everyone who had made such a necessary seminar a possibility.