

The Community Media Forum at the WSIS (Geneva, Dec. 12th, 2003)

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To emphasise the social, cultural and political relevance of Community Media they were given a special Forum at the *World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)*. The Community Media Forum was a common event of the *World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC)*, the *Latin American Association of Educational Broadcasting (Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica, ALER)*, the *Catholic Media Council (CAMECO)*, the *WSIS-Civil Society Community Media Caucus* and the two Swiss funding agencies *Bread for All* and *Swiss Catholic Lenten Fund*. More than 20 speakers from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the U.S.A. were presenting perspectives of community-based communication or showed by concrete examples that this is a powerful instrument for participatory community involvement. The various inputs were arranged according to topical (media legislation) and/or geographical roundtables (Latin America, Africa). The following article provides at least a short summary of the most important aspects of the full-day-programme.

Community Media at the WSIS

Steve Buckley, president of *AMARC*, criticised strongly the Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-centred *WSIS* approach. He stressed that "the Summit's emphasis on ICTs and 'e-strategies' is mainly adequate for elite economies" taking into account that about a third of the world's population has limited or even no access to electricity. He wondered why the *WSIS Declaration of Principles* intends explicitly to "... promote the development goals of the [UN] Millenium Declaration, namely the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger..." without strengthening the most widespread, accessible and cost-effective means of communication. According to Buckley, radio has been proven to be an affordable, decentralized and simple-to-manage medium especially for the poorest and most marginalized communities. At the *WSIS* about 50 states were willing to recognise the growing importance of community media by mentioning them explicitly in the official documents as tools for poverty reduction and strengthening democratic values. They were encouraged in doing so by the positive experiences of multilateral bodies like the *UNDP*, *UNESCO* and the *World Bank*. Nevertheless, three states – Mexico, El Salvador and China – vetoed any reference to Community Media in the *Declaration of Principles* as well as in the *Action Plan*.

Communication, Democracy and Cultural Diversity

Alfonso Gumucio Dagrón from the *Communication for Social Change Consortium, CFSCC* (a new NGO specialised in development communication training and evaluation) highlighted the importance of community media in order to strengthen cultural as well as linguistic diversity. He pointed out that a homogenisation of language and culture is particularly fostered through the Internet as nearly 70% of all Internet contents worldwide are in English. According to new statistical surveys about 90% of the languages of the world are not represented in the Internet! Citing examples from different parts of the world Gumucio showed that in contrast community communication is able to maintain and strengthen local knowledge, language and culture. For more info see:

<http://www.virtualactivism.org/news/03news/wsisdocs/one/commedial.htm>.

La Práctica Inspira!

Latin America has 40 years of experience with regard to community radio (*radio popular y comunitaria*). *ALER* presented the research study *The Practice Inspires: Lessons Learnt from 32 Creative Latin American Community Radios*. This study gives detailed insights into the "success

stories" of stations and initiatives from 12 Latin American countries with an outstandingly high level of community participation and listenership. The sample ranges from rural to urban radio stations run by children, NGOs or Churches. All of them are characterised by a strong identification with their community, offering unique responses to specific local needs. Not surprisingly these stations are also public opinion leaders. At the core of their identity they see their listeners not as consumers but as actively participating individuals. This aspect of participatory community broadcasting was illustrated by two examples. *Radio Los Cumiches* (Estelí, Nicaragua) is a station where children produce and run their own programmes. *Radio Favela* (Belo Horizonte, Brazil) has been awarded by the UN for their campaigns on drug prevention. By articulating and lobbying the interests of their audience both stations became the mouth-piece of social change in their communities. From April 2004 these and 30 other case studies (including audio examples) will be available on CD-ROM accompanied by a book called *La Práctica Inspira* (only in Spanish, for more info see: www.aler.org.ec)

Experiences from Africa

A continental shift from Latin America to Africa further broadened the picture of worldwide community media initiatives. According to Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki from the *African Women's Development and Communication Network, FEMNET* (focusing on African women's non-governmental organisations) programming is still weak in terms of incorporating gender throughout the programme schedule. African women are still underrepresented regarding the production and management of community radio stations.

Experiences from *Good News Radio* in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa showed how community radio plays an important emotional and psychological role for housebound HIV-AIDS patients. Malamine Sylla from *Radio Jamana* (Koutiala, Mali) stated that formerly rural farmers had no access to basic information like the weather forecast or the local cereal prices. In addition to these services the station also launches public awareness campaigns regarding maintenance of peace, voters' rights and Primary Health Care in the different languages spoken locally.

Tombi Nyathi from the *Media Institute of Southern Africa, MISA* (which focuses on the need to promote free, independent and pluralistic media in the region) presented a Zimbabwean community publishing project. Small numbers of booklets written on the spot in local languages are published at village level and in such a way provide an alternative source of information. As the Zimbabwean government holds a monopoly on the waves, this is one of few uncensored media.

For more info on African experiences see:

<http://www.virtualactivism.org/news/03news/wsisdocs/one/commedia3.htm>

Community Media Legislation

The technological developments in the broadcasting sector and the reduction in cost of the respective equipment had frequently the effect that community radios were mushrooming in Latin America and Africa, often operating under unclear legal conditions. John Barker from *Article 19* (named after Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to combat censorship by promoting freedom of expression) stressed the central issues of media legislation. He emphasised the necessity to improve the economic environment for community broadcasters through a preferential tax system. He also pointed out the need to establish balanced frequency planning in order to ensure its equitable share. And license requirements should be handled by an independent regulatory body based on clear criteria which should be subject to judicial review. Maria Victoria Polanco from the *Colombian Communication Ministry* summarised the experiences since the implementation of the Community Media Law in 1996. 487 Colombian communities have their own radio station, and additionally 27 indigenous communities run their own medium. The Colombian state not only legalised the community radios, but also supports the community media movement by strengthening decentralised networks as well as training initiatives. Nestor Busso from the *Argentinean Community Radio*

Association, FARCO (Federación Argentina de Radios Comunitarios) showed how the principles of *National Security Doctrine* implemented by the Military Dictatorship in 1980 resulted in an undemocratic frequency allocation for more than twenty years. Sergio Fernández Novoa from the *Argentinean Radio Authority (COMFER)* explained that the government is now preparing a new communication law which is intended to give non-commercial media the same rights as commercial and state-owned media. Gustavo Gómez (*AMARC Community Radio Legislation Programme*) highlighted that community media are often obliged to be "poor (without income), few (only one frequency per city) and small (limitation of power)", whereas commercial outlets do not face these restrictions. Nevertheless, the Interamerican Commission for Human Rights recently recognised that Community Media for the time being are underprivileged.

Beyond National Experiences

The Community Media Forum was rounded off by thematic contributions to "Networking and Globalising Community Media". See <http://www.virtualactivism.org/news/03news/wsisdocs/one/commedia4.htm> for a detailed report on this session.

One outstanding example came from the USA where local community radio groups were able to establish a national network with a common programme broadcast via satellite, which was due to its popularity also converted into a TV programme. A further example mentioned was the U.S. American national satellite network *Deep Dish TV* which links producers, independent video makers etc. Deep Dish TV assembles material from producers around the world and transmits it to community television stations and home dish owners nationwide.

Nevertheless, community networking initiatives are at their very beginning in other regions of the world. Bharat Koirala (*AMARC*) presented the example of Nepal, where 26 private radio stations have opened in the capital city of Kathmandu since 1997 of which six are community radios. Compared to the overall situation in South Asia the community media scene in Nepal could therefore serve as an impetus for other states in this area.

Conclusion

As the Community Media Forum filled a thematic gap at the *WSIS* it became one of the most visited civil society events of the last Summit day. The quite different experiences from all over the world offered a fascinating insight into the great diversity of community-driven media work. With regard to the Second Phase of the World Summit to be held in November 2005 in Tunis it was commonly agreed that community media need further lobbying by strengthening networking and training activities. National governments should be encouraged to establish balanced frequency planning in order to ensure its equitable share. In addition, creative combinations of community media and Internet – as the *UNESCO* – community multimedia telecentres in Mali and Senegal – should be promoted.