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Pre-summit workshop on
**Connecting Communities through Community
Broadcasting & ICTs**

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Text of panel remarks

By Nalaka Gunawardene

Director and CEO, TVE Asia Pacific, www.tveap.org

We need more AirDiversity!

Promoting air-diversity is just as important as safeguarding biodiversity and cultural diversity. Let there be a cacophony on the airwaves coming from as many sources as possible, argues Nalaka Gunawardene.

I'm very happy to be part of this workshop, but I should declare upfront where I am coming from:

- Although I've worked in the radio medium in my professional career in various capacities, my current work does not concern radio. My radio colleagues say I've defected to the more glamorous television!
- I live in a country -- Sri Lanka -- that has never allowed any genuinely community broadcasting to emerge. In fact, successive governments since early the 1990s have consistently suppressed it.
- I do have a strong interest in how information and communication technologies (ICTs) can serve the public interest. My work for the *Digital Review of Asia Pacific*¹ has involved watching and chronicling these trends.

As you know, ICT is a basket term that includes the older technologies like radio, television and fixed phones as well as newer ones such as computers, Internet and mobile phones.

So when our topic says 'Connecting Communities through Community Broadcasting and ICTs', we have to remember that broadcasting is itself very much an ICT - even if it is

¹ <http://www.digital-review.org/>

a well established one. As UNESCO data confirm, we have many more radio and television sets on the planet than newer ICTs like computers and mobile phones. And it is radio and TV that still give us the best returns by allowing quick and easy access to hundreds of millions of people.

A century of experiences...or mistakes?

Radio broadcasting is over a century old. For much of that period, governments -- and later, corporations -- have monopolised or dominated the airwaves. Those in capital cities have controlled the access to airwaves within countries, and decided what content could ride the airwaves, and indeed, who was allowed to get on the air.

People's access to the airwaves has been confined, in many countries, to the amateur radio bands where enthusiasts engage in point-to-point, largely bilateral conversations.

Community broadcasting takes it to the next stage, but works against many odds -- economic, political and legal.

Let our discussion today look at how millions of ordinary people can access the airwaves to talk to each other -- and to have their voices heard to the rest of us who typically gather at media meetings like this one.

In other words, we should be talking about how everyone can join the conversation on the airwaves. For too long, most members of our audiences have been passively listening or watching.

Whether we like it or not, technology is now changing that...not a moment too soon!

If we truly believe in the media pluralism and empowerment of people that we often talk about, we should welcome and encourage this process.

The newer ICTs allow us to make broadcasting more interactive, so that it is no longer passive and one-way. It also lowers the entry barriers to new players because the digital technology has made equipment cheaper and easier to use.

But you already know this. The real barriers are not in technology or even resources. It is in the realm of policy, law and regulation. That's where we in Asia have more hurdles to clear.

We can't jump over these hurdles with too much baggage from the past.

So let's clarify a couple of basics, and bust some persistent myths while at it...

Myth No 1: Rural romance

UN data confirm that more than half the world's population -- including significant numbers of its poor -- now live in cities or semi-urban areas. Yet, strangely, many members of the development community continue to think of poverty and under-development as exclusively or largely rural phenomena.

They are hooked on a romanticised notion of the rural poor. They cannot see (or choose to ignore) a more multi-faceted reality that includes the urban poor.

The *State of the World's Cities 2006/2007* report, published by UN-HABITAT, clearly says: "It is generally assumed that urban populations are healthier, more literate and more prosperous than rural populations. However, *State of the World's Cities Report 2006/7* has broken new ground by showing that the urban poor suffer from an urban penalty: slum dwellers in developing countries are as badly off if not worse off than their rural relatives."

This kind of evidence is being ignored by researchers, activists and UN officials who have fallen (or sleep-walked) into a 'rural romance trap'.

To them, the low income level and deprivation of basic human amenities do not seem to qualify a person for support in various poverty reduction efforts. That person must also live in an idyllic village, away from major signs of civilization, and preferably in a tiny mud hut surrounded by starving children and emaciated cattle!

If we are evidence-based and non-discriminatory, we have to shatter this rural myth.

Myth No 2: Neat, manageable communities

The next myth is in the popular notion of communities. Communities are not just rural and unspoilt as some of you might imagine.

What does 'community' meant to many card-carrying members of the development community? For starters:

- To begin with, people must be remote and rural, and in a geographically confined location.
- They are invariably poor, under-developed and living on the edges of survival.
- If they also have unique cultural artefacts or performances, that would offer convenient photographic or videographic opportunities to the development workers travelling from the city bearing gifts.

You get the idea. Now I ask you to get real.

Yes, such idyllic, hapless and romanticised communities probably exist in some endangered form in a few locations. But in most parts of the Real World (at least in Asia), communities -- both urban and rural -- are undergoing rapid transformation:

- People are on the move in search of jobs and opportunities.
- Technologies are on the move -- especially mobile phones that no development agency put their money on!
- People are discerning and demanding, not blissfully ignorant or willing to settle for any offering from the outside!

These may seriously shatter some of your visions of an idyllic and ideal community, but these are essentially positive changes.

And communities no longer need to be defined merely by geographic proximity.

Newer ICTs now allow individuals scattered over larger areas to be connected via the airwaves or the web. This enables the creation and sustaining of:

- communities of practice;
- communities of shared interest/need;
- single issue agitation such as rallying around for constitutional reform, or repeal of an unfriendly law; and
- clamouring for political or democratic reforms.

So please move away from your narrow understanding of communities. Members of any of the above kinds of communities can benefit from community broadcasting.

And broadcasting itself isn't what it used to be. The days of centrally manufactured content being imposed upon a hapless audience are now over. Interactivity and user-generated content are IN. Pompous, know-all anchors and presenters are OUT.

Things have moved on in the media world. So must we who are development sensitive!

Managing Diversity

The organisers have posed three questions for us in this session:

- What are the success factors in integrating ICTs to community radio?
- What synergies can be combined to enhance the development of community radio?
- Can the use of ICTs by community radios help empower disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society?

I believe the success factors should apply to both content producers and audiences. To name a few such factors:

- Relevance of content and context
- Affordability (capital and recurrent costs)
- Accessibility (especially applicable to audiences)
- User-friendliness

But what matters is not technologies themselves, but their application to meet people's information needs and to solve real world problems.

This is where we have to be careful. I cringe every time I hear remarks about the poor just needing survival or sustenance related information. The information needs and wants of the poor can be as diverse as everybody else's.

Sarvodaya -- Sri Lanka's largest development NGO -- once surveyed the information needs of poor people in rural and semi-urban areas. This revealed that the poor had as diverse information needs as any other income group, including health and nutrition information; and details on bank loans, foreign jobs and insurance policies. There was also interest in world affairs, national politics and cultural affairs.

ICTs -- old and new -- can help meet these information needs of the poor. But first, we must stop treating poor people as some kind of sub-human species with a simpler set of living needs and aspirations. This is another trap that some community broadcasters fall into.

In an increasingly multi-cultural world, another role for community broadcasting is to cater to the unmet cultural needs of ethnic and cultural groups that are geographically scattered around the globe.

I was recently in Melbourne, Australia's most multi-cultural city, that has community radio and television services catering to over 30 ethnic and language groups who now call this city their home. These services are state-funded, but are managed entirely by the different groups on their own.

But state funding and air-time/spectrum allocation are no longer essential. Web-based broadcasts can reach out to communities sharing a common culture in any part of the world. Catering to various diaspora's unmet cultural needs can be a new niche for community broadcasting in the years to come.

Parallel to that is accommodating information and entertainment needs of various minorities. Again, let's not be trapped in conventional definitions of minorities. Every one of us is a numerical minority in some context or another.

For example, I am in a tiny and neglected minority in my native Sri Lanka when it comes to cricket -- the true 'national religion' -- because I don't fancy the ball game. How I wish I had a minority radio or TV channel that caters to my needs!

Needed: Greater Air-Diversity

If we celebrate diversity in who and what we are, we must also promote greater diversity on the airwaves.

Broadcasting -- both mainstream and community -- needs to cater to diversity in our societies in terms of:

- Cultural and ethnic backgrounds;
- Educational attainment;

- Socio-economic levels;
- Political views; and
- Personal choices and sexual orientation.

It's not enough to have dozens of channels to tune into. We need genuine plurality in content as well as access to the airwaves.

In the past three decades, the world has recognised the value of conserving biological diversity. More recently, thanks to UNESCO's campaigning, we have also agreed on the need for preserving cultural diversity. Both are now supported by inter-governmental conventions.

In similar vein, we need to promote what I call air-diversity: greater diversity and plurality on the airwaves.

This ties in very well with media pluralism -- a situation where all people in society have access to information on issues that affect their lives; AND have a way of making their voices heard in national public debate.

Genuine media pluralism implies several things:

- diversity of media ownership, including media which explicitly serve a public or community interest;
- media that are accessible and intelligible to all people, particularly in relation to literacy and language; and
- media that reflect diversity of public opinion, particularly of the marginalised groups in society.

When these criteria are applied, the global trend is that *we are moving away from, and not towards, real media pluralism*. This should cause concern us all.

Media freedom is necessary, but not sufficient, for media pluralism. While the past decade has witnessed many advances in media freedom (even if progress has been patchy at best), and there has been a numerical increase in the number of radio and television channels, they have not necessarily enhanced media pluralism.

Why? Because media ownership -- at the global, regional and national levels -- has been concentrating in fewer hands, squeezing out many independent players. This now threatens to replace the earlier governmentally controlled concentration of media with an increasingly narrow commercial and political one. This has serious implications for air-diversity as well as accountability in the media.

These are some of the 'bigger picture' issues that we must address when talking about community broadcasting and ICTs. We can't always afford to be focused on grassroots needs at micro level....especially because what is possible or not possible at that level is decided by what happens at macro level.

We have a great deal of unfinished business and fresh challenges.