Chapter 13

Mahaweli Community Radio

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The first of its kind in South Asia, Sri Lanka's Mahaweli Community Radio (MCR) was set up in 1981 by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) with the assistance of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). Now considered a prototype for the region, the project was largely initiated and implemented through international cooperation. The MCR experience provides a base to discuss the positive as well as the negative influences of international cooperation in setting up community radio, particularly in the South Asian Region.

This article looks first at the origin, philosophy, approach and mode of operation of MCR with reference to the role played by the foreign collaborators. Following that, the current situation will be reviewed before considering some of the positive and negative aspects of foreign funding in a project of this nature. Lessons that could be learned in relation to foreign collaboration and funding in setting up community radio projects, particularly in the South Asian region, will be discussed at the conclusion.

THE ORIGINS OF MCR

A new government had recently come to power in Sri Lanka and in 1979 its number one priority was a programme to divert the Mahaweli River – a huge irrigation scheme involving the resettlement of approximately one million people from all over the country. In the same year Knud Ebbesen, a Danish broadcaster with experience in the public access department of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, was on a private visit

to Sri Lanka. Ebbesen sensed that this was an opportune moment to propose a participatory radio project for Sri Lanka. The Mahaweli Community Radio Project would be set up alongside the river diversion project, to facilitate the socio-economic development of the settlers.

Fortunately at the time of making this proposal Dr. Sarath Amunugama, a reputed communication scholar who advocated two-way participatory communication, was Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of State which looked into matters pertaining to mass media. The Director General of SLBC, the late Thevis Guruge and the Deputy Director General, the late E.S.T Fernando, who was later appointed as overall coordinator of MCR, were also most willing to support the project. According to Choy Arnaldo (1990) of UNESCO, the support of these people was a major contributing factor to the initiation of MCR.

UNESCO and DANIDA provided the initial capital for the project and ongoing costs were to be provided by SLBC. Total foreign funding received for the project was US$1.1 million (UNESCO, 1990).

A FORUM FOR PEOPLE

The MCR concept was a modified version of the experience of *Baandvaerkstedet* – the Tape Workshop, a public access programme of Radio Denmark. *Baandvaerkstedet* teams provided technical and production support to individuals and community groups so that they could produce their own radio programmes for broadcast on Radio Denmark's national service.

While the MCR project made a large number of significant adaptations to the Danish experience, MCR proponents were convinced that radio's contribution to the socioeconomic development of the settlers would only be realised if they facilitated the listeners' participation in the programming.

This participation warranted a radical departure from SLBC's conventional practices. The new production techniques required investments in transportation and new recording equipment modified for use in the countryside. They also required expertise in field production techniques that were unknown in Sri Lanka. In this way, international cooperation was a pre-requisite to setting up MCR.

The MCR philosophy has developed within the last decade. The following are the major guidelines that could be identified at the time of writing.

1. The urban elitist orientation of radio should be minimised if not eradicated. Mahaweli Community Radio could contribute towards this by providing opportunities for rural listeners to voice their opinions.

2. Because rural life should be approached as a whole, any subject relevant to rural life can become a programme theme.

3. Maximum possible access to all sections and points of view on development issues should be given to create an atmosphere for constructive discussion and inter-community communications.

4. Programmes should be conceptualised not on the basis of what the producers think, but on field research findings.

5. Listeners are pleased to have their own kith and kin visiting their homes through the "speaking box" (radio) rather than strangers. Thus, innovations are more likely to be adapted when someone with similar socio-economic standing conveys them. This is best provided for in an exchange of experiences rather than a lecture or monologue.

6. The ability to participate in this exchange of views helps listeners see their own potential and responsibility in the realisation of development goals.

7. Maximum effect of local community radio is achieved when target groups are well-defined.

8. Development is not something that radio can achieve alone. Radio should be part of an overall strategy. Therefore, Mahaweli Community Radio works in close harmony and coordination with other media and other organisations.

MODE OF OPERATIONS: POTS, PANS AND THE MICROPHONE TO THE VILLAGE

Two methods are used to operationalise the above mentioned guidelines. The first method, used since the inception of the project in 1981, involves mobile teams travelling to the villages. Later, in 1985, the first local community radio station was established in Girandurukotte, one of the Mahaweli Settlement villages. A second local community station was set up on an experimental basis at Kotmale in the upper Mahaweli area in 1989. The field-visit production teams, comprised of two producers and a cook, go to a village and spend four days there, often staying at a public place such as the village temple or community development centre. They explore the socio-economic and even psychological realities of village life. Once the producers gather first-hand knowledge on a given theme, they make their recordings. They then return to their studio to prepare for the third week.

In the third week a larger production team of producers, technical officers and assistants returns to the village. They carry with them a mobile console and other recording equipment. During the previous week the villagers have been organising a cultural show for recording by the production team. Local participation in these shows is very high; sometimes more than 120 people present music, theatre and poetry in a show lasting six to eight hours.

Following the cultural show, the producers stay in the village to edit the programme, inviting local people to help shape the final programme a mix of the cultural show and the interviews from the first week. The final programme is later broadcast on the regional service of SLBC.

One criticism about the MCR method of operation is that it is too costly and thus not suitable for a developing country such as Sri Lanka. As one high ranking SLBC officer commented, the Muslim Service is able to produce a one hour weekly programme using existing resources, but the MCR field teams require a large amount of additional

resources and financing to produce a programme of the same duration. While the difference can be accounted for by the fact that the Muslim service production is studio-based and MCR field-based, critics are quick to point out that MCR's mode of operations can only last as long as foreign funding is available.

There can be little dispute that the MCR operations at the initial stages were costly, and that the very nature of participatory community broadcasting demands more resources than studio production. However, through a process of experimentation, cost has been brought down to a level where MCR may be able to operate without foreign funding. At the initial stage when three weekly half hour programmes were broadcast (1981-1985), a programme hour cost about US $250 – about ten times more than the usual cost of a programme hour of the regional stations. However by using new formats, mixing village productions with studio productions and attaching production teams to regional stations, the cost was brought down to about US $37.50 per hour. At the Girandurukotte station a programme hour was produced at a recurrent cost of about US $35.00.

One may ask why low cost production techniques could not have been implemented from the very beginning. For instance why were local community radios, which are less costly then field visits, not introduced at the beginning? There appear to be two primary reasons for this. First, if local community radios were proposed at the very beginning, a monopolistic institution like the SLBC would probably have rejected the idea of community radio wholesale. By introducing the concept on a gradual basis MCR was able to survive within the framework of SLBC. Secondly, the early years of MCR were experimental and experimental projects are more costly than conventional ones.

CRISIS: THE PROJECT AT THE CROSSROADS

Within the period 1981-1989, MCR's mobile teams visited some 1,500 villages. Surveys and studies have revealed the extent of MCR's impact in the region. Girandurukotte Community Radio and the MCR broadcasts on the Anuradhapura regional service are listened to by about 90 percent of the local population and are the second most important source of agricultural and health-related information. Within a decade of its inception, the MCR project had expanded to reach almost the entire Sinhala-speaking rural population. Community radio teams with mobile recording and editing facilities were stationed at all regional stations. A cadre of local broadcasters who were adequately qualified, trained and committed to the project had developed.

However, not everything was going well with the project and problems became apparent when the international funding and assistance ran out in 1990. The project had failed to gain long-lasting support from SLBC and there was a high degree of disorganisation. Political violence was one reason for this disorganisation. In 1988, at the height of violence in southern Sri Lanka, about 100 extra-judicial killings per day were taking place. Obviously community radio gets disorganised in such an atmosphere. However, the root cause of the disorganisation of the MCR was not political violence.

The Second UNESCO Regional Seminar was an attempt to discuss the future of the project. Evelyne Foy, (1991) General Secretary of AMARC, participated in the seminar and observed a situation that was far from encouraging:

> An evaluation of the current state of MCR by the local producers raised a number of problems: the difficulty of keeping resources intended for MCR within the project, a general lack of local resources, and centralisation of decision-making in the capital and in the head offices of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting System.

However, a degree of optimism has surfaced as Knud Ebbesen recently visited Sri Lanka to assist the Ministry for Information in filing a proposal to establish an autonomous institutional structure for community radio in Sri Lanka. The proposal is being studied and there are strong indications that it will receive government approval. However, at the time of this writing the morale of MCR broadcasters is low, community radio units attached to the regional stations are in a state of disintegration, air time has been reduced and field visits have been greatly cut back. The two local community radios are functioning but with reduced momentum.

THE PROS AND CONS OF FOREIGN FUNDING AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

It is important to investigate how things changed so dramatically once foreign funding started to withdraw. A more complete understanding of this problem might be gained by further considering the plus and minus points of foreign funding and international cooperation.

As mentioned earlier the MCR project was largely a foreign initiative made possible by the availability of international funding and because foreign collaborators were able to convince personalities engaged in policy-making and managing radio. It appears that in the establishment of community radio in South Asia, where broadcast media are State-controlled and highly centralised, some intervention of respected international agencies such as UNESCO and DANIDA can play a positive role.

Although a few personalities in the top management of SLBC supported community radio from the very beginning, there was opposition from many who were engaged in conventional broadcasting. The US $1.1 million received from the donor agencies not only provided financial strength, but also provided a degree of autonomy that shielded the MCR project management from those who opposed community radio. The MCR project enjoyed a degree of autonomy far exceeding that of any other programme service of SLBC. This autonomy provided an atmosphere for the programme producers to work freely.

International cooperation helped MCR to exist with minimum political interference. In a country where broadcasting is highly politicised, keeping out of politics is an important achievement. Without it credibility wears out and the survival of the project under successive governments becomes difficult. The partnership of UNESCO and DANIDA, which required political neutrality could be cited among the various factors contributing to MCR's "apolitical" performance.

Another plus of international cooperation was that the MCR concept received wide recognition in the international setting and was adapted for other national settings. According to Ebbesen, the MCR experience has been widely used for an integrated rural development project in Bangladesh. Wijayananda Jayaweera, a pioneer of MCR and later a UNESCO consultant has used the MCR experience in developing and setting up rural broadcast systems in Bhutan and Cambodia.

In a sense the entire MCR exercise is an experiment in community radio, a new medium in South Asia. With the MCR experience the region gained a community radio model that has been tested and proven workable and which, with appropriate modifications, can and has been used in other national settings. It is largely because of the international agencies that the MCR project has become a model for the region and not only Sri Lanka.

What are the negative implications of international cooperation? The most prominent negative influence on MCR was an over-dependence on foreign support. After ten years the MCR project had come to operate as if the funding would always be there, and had not developed an appropriate plan in preparation for the withdrawal of international support.

That MCR has not developed into a self-supporting and commercially viable entity is another negative aspect of over-dependence on foreign funding. Presently the only source of earnings is the income gained from commercials at Girandurukotte Community Radio. Ten years of dependence on foreign funding has not helped MCR diversify its sources of funding and explore alternatives.

A more subtle, but nevertheless important factor, is the attitude that international funding encouraged within SLBC. While on the one hand foreign support brought a degree of autonomy to the project, it also led to SLBC's belief that the project was the responsibility of UNESCO and DANIDA. At the end of the final phase of the project there were only some sketchy proposal to create an autonomous, institutional structure for community radio. Nothing solid had materialised and MCR was in a very vulnerable position.

CONCLUDING CONSIDERATIONS

The crisis which MCR is facing may simply be the period of disorganisation which most projects face at the time of transition. However, it still provides two important insights into the role of international cooperation in setting up sustainable community radio, particularly in the South Asian region.

The first insight is that MCR's failure to win long-lasting support within SLBC may be related to factors inherent in Asian broadcasting traditions. According to Felix Librero, "Asian broadcasting systems were originally organised as means of propagating government thinking and were designed to simply inform the people."

A project such as MCR which attempts to open a two-way communication process in the midst of such a system will inevitably run into opposition. There is no alternative to facing this reality. One way of facing it is to have a system where listeners

are actively involved in the management of community radio. Whenever the guardians of the conventional broadcast system stand in the way of community radio, the listeners would speak up and support their station. Listener clubs are one promising way of involving the communities in this way.

The second lesson to be learned from the MCR experience is that coming up with plans on how to permanently institutionalise a community radio project, must be considered as the collective responsibility of the international agencies as well as the receiving organisation. Designing a plan for the withdrawal of funding agencies is at least as important as initiating a project. Such a plan needs expertise and should be implemented well before funding is withdrawn. The international agencies should provide the expertise while the receiving organisation should take the initiative of drawing up such a plan.

As the MCR experience demonstrates, in establishing community radios in Sri Lanka and most probably in South Asia, international cooperation is something that should be welcomed. However, maximum utilisation of international cooperation can be made only if the international agencies and the national organisations define their roles and act accordingly.

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