The Role of Community Radio Central to Development

By Ahmed Swapan Mahmud

Background

A two day long national consultation on community radio was held in Dhaka on 6-7 December 2005 where ministers, policy makers, civil society leaders, experts, academicians, researchers, NGOs and media professionals and the speakers from the grassroots took participation and expressed the need for the community radio. The focus of the two days consultation centres around the issues like: the role of CR in development, experiencing sharing with SA countries, preparedness to establish CR in Bangladesh, constraints of CR, proposed policies for creating a favorable environment etc.

The movement for community broadcasting is taking a positive turn with positive engagement with policy makers and also a positive engagement with the civil society. For a last couple years Voices for Interactive Choice and Empowerment (VOICE), Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio and Communications (BNNRC), Mass-Line Media Centre (MMC), Focus and Young Power in Social Actions (YPSA) have been working together for policy influencing in favor of community broadcasting policy formulation in Bangladesh upholding the issues of development. And with a process, the two day consultation ahhs been held with the support UNESCO, UNICEF and UNDP.

There was a strong need to hold a follow up session involving the concerned stakeholders and with this view in mind, this round table is taken place. The objectives of this roundtable are :

Re-emphasize the necessity of enacting draft Bangladesh Broadcasting Act -2003 soonest as possible;

Initiate piloting community radio having a positive outlook/approval of the government and also to look the challenging aspects of piloting like contents, quality etc.; and

Form an effective and efficient high level advocacy group who will help to create the favourable regulatory atmosphere through influencing the government for the interest of people.

Role of community radio

Global media has become the powerful tool to control over people and has been grown as a profit sector where people’s voices are quite marginalized and neglected. The nature of communication is changing that is keeping impact over life and livelihood. The role of controlled media is dominating the world where common people have least of the access to take part in decision-making process expressing their views and opinion and also they are left out from the development process. The influence of government over media also
impedes the way of work that ultimately blocks the freedom of people’s choices for expressing their ideas and views. But for equitable society, people’s participation in the development process is considered as a major factor where community radio can do contribute a lot constituting their life better.

Media systems have been commercializing and concentrating at a lightning speed, threatening to destroy participatory, public-oriented media. Powerful commercial lobby groups are drawing up international media laws and regulations, creating a new system that is even more exclusive and self-serving. Media system in Bangladesh is undergoing a major transformation. Participatory media system is gradually disappeared and people’s interests are rarely reflected, people don’t have also any participation at any levels in the whole media system. The media is greatly controlled by the business farm and government has also the controlling mechanism over media, which monopolizes the whole system of media and thus creates an information underclass- i.e. the creates the gap between the information rich and information poor. In the emergence of new economy due to the globalization process the poor people have becoming poorer and quite left out of this process and ‘becoming a cultural dumping ground for mass market products made by and for the richest economy.

In this context, community radio is a prior agenda that can help building up participatory practice in the society, which leads to people’s governance. It can facilitate people’s access and promote their participation in local level decision-making process, which ultimately results for participatory governance in the society. We can say community radio can play the role as promoter of participatory, accountable and transparent governance system in a society and it can also create enormous opportunities for growth and poverty reduction.

The economy of the world is gradually concentrated to a fewer number of institutions which is constituted by the rich nations and their institutions that have taken over the role of dominance mainly to the life and livelihood of the poor people through control over resources of the world. The process of the dominance has manifold implications, e.g. political, social, cultural, religious traditions and knowledge issues of the society. But to make the economic playground even, which helps reducing divisions and discrimination in the society, the need for community radio is indispensable which can play democratic role that can give a well shape to economy, governance, in the process of transparency, accountability and participatory partnership with a multi-stakeholder approach. The existing divide-- social divide, economic divide, education divide, knowledge divide, cultural divide, urban-rural divide, men-women divide, North- South divide and even in between the countries so forth can be reduced that promotes human rights in the society.

Rural communities are totally deprived of getting the opportunity in information sharing and communications, which is a deprivation of their rights to access to information. However, steps taken in Nepal, Srilanka, Pakistan and India encourage other fellow countries to create a favourable environment in community broadcasting use. But in context of Bangladesh still there is no community broadcasting law and regulations, enacted though there is a draft broadcasting law lying on the table for a couple of years.

With a view to come out from the existing dominated scenario, people’s media is
essentially important to be explored by community people where people will do manage related by themselves without any dominance or impositions.

**People’s Agenda First**

Community radio is an alternative media is the counter balance to profit-motive corporate media. What community media emphasizes is to facilitating empowerment of people with their active participation in the process not as passive consumers/listeners. Because it has specific objectives to promote people’s agenda first—local knowledge, cultures, human rights and social justice, environmental issues and community problems as well as the issues related to development.

Without people’s involvement with the process i.e. in planning, managing, designing, marketing and ownership pattern, efforts will all be vain, the practices of governance and democracy will only be rhetoric, not will be in practice. Community radio for social development can promote participatory relationship with the social sector and business sector that result for promoting public participation and governance.

Community radio can be used to protest against crime and human rights violation, any oppression, and also to promote human rights situation, the practice of democracy and promoting governance system through transparent and accountable relation building among citizens and above all in the society to a great extent.

Community radio offers a local counter-balance to face the challenges of global media concentration and the dominance of state owned agenda setting and media performances. It promotes participation, protects human rights, facilitates empowerment, ensure participatory governance upholding people’s opinion in a democratic process through making active citizenship. For media decentralization through which people’s participation in getting and exchanging information can be more ensured and promote human rights situation through community radio.

Community media radio has the role in development if it is established in local government institutions, thus people will can get encouragement to participate in the activities with more enthusiasm. It can as well contribute a lot in development activities e.g. mitigating disaster, making people aware, by establishing radio stations in educational institutions (campus radio), which will facilitate the transparency, accountability and participation of an educational institution.

As experiences in many countries community radio has been integrated with practices of community life. They offer concrete means for public participation and for depending cultural diversity. The content includes political and economic news that facilitates community dialogue and involvement, community and personal messages (marriage, union-meetings, lost donkeys, musical greetings, educational programs for development (health, environment, gender), information programs, and culturally relevant entertainment. Through access to the production and consumption of relevant communications, these media form a collective platform for community empowerment.’ The context of
Bangladesh demands CR which helps to promote literacy, human rights, transparency and accountability of respective community, service delivery mechanism of local government, educational, cultural and social activities etc. Besides, through this means the villages will be interconnected. Besides, there would be huge varieties of subjects like reproductive health, agriculture, disaster mitigation, local market, local trade, local cultures etc can be addressed properly through local radio. It can enhance the social harmony among the communities, it can exercise creativity, cultural diversity, including the disadvantaged, disable and ethnic communities as a closest medium for the people to speak out their views that are left out from all the development processes so far.

There are importance to human equalities in every aspects and facilitate the role of expression and access to the information to disadvantaged group, coastal people, ethnic groups, rural women, poor communities etc and to uphold the social, economic and cultural aspects and political will of people. Community radio helps balance the existing inequalities. They provide the means for cultural expression, community discussion, and debate. They supply news and information and facilitate political engagement. Radio is the most wide spread electronic communications device in the world and community radio is a practical and cost effective means for reaching and connecting the world’s poorest communities.’ To achieve social, economic cultural and political goals, it helps as a means to achieve communities that opens a wider space to practice rights, justice, participation and democracy.

Community radio can play vital role providing awareness, education, and exchange of information to different communities. For free flow of information and promoting people’s right there must be broadcasting policies and the concerned authority will come forward and take necessary steps.

**Recommendations**

The existing draft broadcasting law must be enacted soon that allows community radio through which people can exercise and participate in the development process;

Continuing the massive campaign to build up people’s consensus to move forward the agenda demanding broadcasting approval from the government;

Special programme in the channel and newspaper highlighting the importance of community radio should be introduced;

Community radio stations and broadcasting need to be approved by the concerned authority and so far Bangladesh government is making a progress over the issue and continuous policy lobbing hopefully make it a success. In this concern a high level advocacy group can be formed who will influence the government in favour of the community radio.

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