



Gordon Naidoo\*

## Introduction

"In Africa, the terms ingenuity and technology more often than not, go hand in hand. While the developed world moves at high speed into the Information Age assisted by the appropriate technology, the African continent is still debating ways and means of how to regulate the African Broadcasting environment consisting of radio and television stations. It is premature to talk of "new media" and the "Information Age" when the old media" has not yet been properly accessed in most African countries"

Jurie van der Walt<sup>1</sup>

The above observation serves to highlight the fundamental dearth of electronic communications in Africa, and the woeful extent to which it is underserved in this regard. It is no less axiomatic though, that the continent need embark upon an incremental, evolutionary acquisition of 'old technologies', as a prerequisite to engaging in the policy and mechanics of procuring the multiplicity of wireless technologies, likely to impact on sustained socioeconomic development. The old 'hardwired infrastructures' are in any instance, indicative of a slew of 'industrial revolution' technologies, and the attendant socio economic formations.

The advent and ever permutating nature of the global knowledge economy and its determining influence on the means of economic generation and development, information acquisition and transfer, are compelling arguments for adoption of newer electronic communications infrastructures, representing a substantial departure from that of the earlier 'hardwire technologies'. This imperative to digitize communications, cannot however, be dismissive of the critical role of more accessible 'appropriate technologies' in the developing world, in the light of the infrastructural and economic realities that persist here, and for purposes of this discussion, in the African diaspora in particular. Considering for instance, that a mere one percent of the African population is online<sup>2</sup>, and half of those again in South Africa alone, or that seventy five per cent of Africans have yet to make their first telephone call, it is arguable that 'leapfrogging' and similar overnight conversions to new communications media, are improbable in the short to medium term, despite the inexorable pace of such development in the industrialized world. Though acquisition of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in Africa has witnessed a perceptible growth over the last decade, this has nonetheless been far insufficient to effect a shift of the continent from its position at the bottom of the digital divide<sup>3</sup>.

\* Director, OLSET.  
5th Floor, Olivetti House, 15 Stiemens Street, Braamfontein, South Africa.

Over the past two decades, development and proliferation of a myriad applications of digital information and communications technologies in the industrialized countries, has been vertiginous, resulting in a robust, thriving telecommunications environment that has become commonplace and taken for granted. Individuals and entire communities alike are able to communicate with any part of the globe at the press of a key on a computer, cell phone or other digital appliance, enabling the sending or receiving of e-mails, faxes, telephone calls, sms, internet telephony, web searches, etc, ad infinitum. The possibilities of communication are seemingly limitless, as the technologies proliferate almost daily and simultaneously becoming widely accessible for mass consumption in the industrialized economies. The digital age heralding a plethora of ICTs, is firmly ensconced here, to the extent it is an integral part of collective communications consciousness. This exponential growth of the ICT sector, inadvertently exacerbating the digital divide, holds both opportunity and danger at one and the same time.



## Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the Developing World

"...The opportunity for people to participate in economic, political and cultural life depends on their ability to access and use communication and information services. Individuals need skills and tools to locate the communication pathways, information, and audiences in timely fashion and in an appropriate format. Unequal access to communication resources leads to unequal advantages, and ultimately to inequalities in social and economic opportunities." US Congress (2002)

A recent UNESCO study indicates that the estimated average number of main lines per 1000 people was 18 in Africa against a developed world average of 567, and the estimated number of online subscribers in Africa was 4.15 million against a world total of approximately 514 million<sup>4</sup>. Teledensity in the developing world clearly remains abysmally low with the oft drawn analogy of more telephone lines in Tokyo than in Sub Saharan Africa<sup>5</sup>. The anomalous comparative figures for connectivity between the developed and developing worlds above, looms equally large at the intra continental level, where South Africa comprises little over 50 % of the continent's connectivity, illustrating further, the paucity of infrastructural development and the subsequent dearth of connectivity within African countries north of the Limpopo<sup>6</sup>.

The endemic fragile state of connectivity is compounded by a high incidence of down time due to unreliable and under maintained infrastructure and connectivity. Hence, even where online access is possible, there is no assurance that this will be sustained guaranteeing reasonably unfettered online access for the user. It is estimated that 70% plus of the African continent's population, have yet to make their first telephone call. This staggering observation is a devastating comment on the phenomenal disparities in digital communication opportunity and access between the developing world (and most especially Africa), vis a vis that of the industrialized global dispensations in the 21 century, proclaimed paradoxically as the century of information and communications technology..

It is widely accepted that digital, wireless applications and cell and satellite technology now provide unprecedented capacity to transform the world telecommunications infrastructure in a hitherto unimagined manner. It is however arguable, as to whether the necessary resources for this potentially transformative technology will be realized in the developing

world, in the short to medium term. Near saturation connectivity thus far, remains essentially the preserve of the developed economies<sup>7</sup>. The digital divide shows little sign of letting up or narrowing in the near future, most especially in continued absence of an upturn in the overwhelming majority of African economies. NEPAD, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, hailed as the potential plan for the collective, economic recovery of continent, prioritizes telecommunications infrastructural development as the sine qua non of this anticipated economic regeneration of the continent<sup>8</sup>.

Considering the massive African foreign debt, some \$ 206 billion in Sub Saharan Africa alone<sup>9</sup>, acute demands for basic goods and services in most countries and sustained fiscal stress, resources for ICT infrastructural development will inevitably remain of secondary importance and therefore substantially out of reach, NEPAD ICT prioritization This is turn will serve to exacerbate the digital divide, placing ICTs further out of reach for all but the privileged few, with the implications that might have for African ICT development in the new millennium..

Heightened optimism around the potential success of the plan remains premature and how the west will respond to the collective African programme for economic recovery is yet to be seen, given persisting reservations concerning policy and practice in African states in the 'growth areas' of governance, democracy, civil society and civil liberty, deregulation/free market economy, etc. Given the litany of fundamental developmental imperatives in all sectors, it is improbable that realization of resources for techno 'leapfrogging' will occur. There is instead, considerable evidence to the contrary, of a world increasingly divided along the lines of distribution and access to new socially enhancing, information technologies

capable of expediting their development and economic wellbeing, A firmer entrenchment of poverty and stagnation in developing countries, in the absence of ICT enhanced development in African countries is foreseeable, in a world increasingly morphing into a global knowledge economy...

### Radio : Appropriate Communications Technology (ACT)- ICT Bridge Ubiquitous, Accessible, Cost Effective :



All things equal, the developmental trajectory of the African continent, including that in the sphere of information and communications technologies infrastructure, is theoretically intertwined with the level and degree of prioritization such development is accorded within the NEPAD strategic framework. Apropos ICTs, the NEPAD document is emphatic on the need for African ownership and leadership in a 'people centred' development, and where attainment of universal primary education is concerned, "to reform education from the standpoint of better quality and better access to ICTs..."<sup>10</sup>

Understandably, and as alluded to earlier, within the African context, where access to basic education, health safe drinking water and (increasingly) food are the immediate priorities, revenues for ICT development and access, rank lower in priority on the list of national needs. With a mere 1% of the world's total GDP<sup>11</sup>, the average GDP of African states is drastically low, non conducive to levels of income generation commensurate with that necessary for developing and maintenance of an even modestly effective telecommunications infrastructure. That the bulk of the countries in question represent some 34 of the world's 49 poorest and least developed countries, Africa's access to ICTs is seriously compromised

and dependent upon external financial assistance and technical expertise.

Access to information and education for the overwhelming majority of the continent's population, is grossly lacking, evidenced inter alia, by an overall literacy rate of 41 per cent for the continent. ICTs touted as the mainplank to socioeconomic development and poverty alleviation, is remote and out of reach for all but a miniscule number of the more privileged in these societies. The reality of this equation is that access to more low end, 'appropriate technologies', which are at once more affordable and available, effectively comprise the 'bridging technologies' to the digital divide. Radio most particularly, for these complex reasons, is seen as the major communications artery to local and international news, information and education, for communities otherwise marginalized from high end ICT access.

It is in this light that this South Africa case study, attempts to demonstrate the capacity of radio, as a prime example of 'appropriate information and communications technologies' (AICTs) to assist in effecting educational transformation within schools, local communities across the country..



## Equity of Access

ICTs are amply capable of affording individuals and communities at large, unlimited access to information, entertainment and education, in a manner that raises awareness of the issues and conditions that impact the circumstances in their lives. Emerging from a social order that denied the vast majority of its citizens access to relevant information and quality education for over fifty years, the new democratic dispensation in South Africa prioritized as one of the cornerstones to educational policy, equity

of access to information and education. To this end the new educational policy resonated the strong sentiments of the Jomtien Declaration that "all available instruments and channels of information, communications, and social action could be used to help convey the essential knowledge and inform and educate people on social issues"<sup>12</sup> It urged new avenues for ensuring universal education delivery, most particularly media channels that were effective, efficient and accessible by the billions of educationally disenfranchised. Radio was emphasized as the information technology, widely available in the developing world, and one capable of being deployed more effectively in service of disadvantaged communities. But more importantly, radio was seen as a powerful medium in the delivery of quality educational instruction for learners, in school and out of school, as well as providing Inservice support for teachers, with the objective of making for greater efficiency and effective teaching and learning.

"An estimated 24 million African children are out of school, while of those enrolled, only 61 per cent reach fifth grade.... And of the 22 countries with 70 per cent or more illiterate women, 16 are in sub-Saharan Africa,"<sup>13</sup>

There is a certain paradox in that radio has the claim to having been the foremost, 'wireless' technology, and possibly the first to approximate on becoming a truly (electronic) mass medium in the developing world. In a century where 'wireless' is the shape of all ICT things to come, it is notable if not humbling, that 'wireless' technology made its debut electronically, through the radio. 'Wireless' was synonymous with radio and a revolutionary vehicle at the time, for transcending geographical boundaries on the African continent, as indeed elsewhere. The ubiquitousness of radio in Africa, deriving from near saturation ownership or certainly individual or group access to the medium, ensured its place as an all familiar technology, in even the remotest of rural of communities. Access to this



medium surpassed that of print, audiovisual media, or other electronic technologies, many of which in any instance, were predicated upon the assumption of user literacy. With an ownership rate of one in four and an even higher rate of 'access to a radio', it makes for mass access in a manner considerably more equitable than other ICTs have yet to provide in the developing world<sup>14</sup>.



## Community Radio

Community Radio is loosely defined as 'that service offered to a predetermined "community" based on a geographical location and distribution, usually within a specified radius'<sup>15</sup>. Community Radio however, has a history that goes back some fifty years to Latin America, where it has been used by several interest groups and communities, such as the labour unions, churches, universities, etc. However, seeking a narrow definition of Community radio is difficult, as it manifests itself in several different forms throughout the world. Common to all community radio internationally, are nonetheless certain hallmarks that ensure its independence and contradistinction to mainstream, i.e. state controlled/influenced broadcasting, or for that matter to independent commercial radio, that would additionally include, inter alia,

- local community involvement in the station
- wider community representation and recognition in the broadest content and interests
- community produced programmes receiving airtime
- local content and issues impacting the respective communities served by the station

- considerable diversity of target group interests and opinions, hence greater pluralism in their disposition
- encourage consolidation of local culture and language
- focuses on issues of democracy, group and community rights, participatory citizenship, social change, etc

The arrival and consolidation of Community Radio on the international broadcast landscape, initiated an erosion of state monopoly and control of the information and communications media. Unlike the public broadcaster, this meant in essence, new founded access to 'customized' content with local communities able to 'see themselves reflected in the media', thereby affording them more control over information flows consistent with their needs. Africa was slow to embrace and internalize the power of community radio for some time, a situation that was to radically change over the last decade. The number of African Community Radio stations affiliated to the World Community Radio body, AMARC, is indicative of the rise, expansion and influence of this broadcast sector on the continent<sup>16</sup>.

## Community Radio in South Africa: Helping narrow the Digital Divide



Pre-1994, Community Radio stations were a relatively uncommon occurrence in South Africa. Impervious state controlled broadcasting was dominated by the public broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, which served primarily as an ideological apparatus of the state. A handful of 'pirate' community radio initiatives, illegal under the previous government, were the sole and often dispirit voices of local community political and social interests and culture, within their miniscule footprint. These clandestine community radio efforts were usually

vehicles for information on social issues of democratic change, under the guise of innocuous 'general information' broadcasts.

In recognition of the need to embrace marginalized local communities and offer them a voice in their own development and access to information on issues pertinent to their wellbeing, the Independent Broadcasting Authority Act was passed in 1993, ushering in a new age of community radio broadcasting, a departure from state control and monopoly of broadcast, via the public broadcaster. This implied a new broadcast ecology, within which local communities and interest groups were eligible to apply for renewable licences, (initially one year and subsequently four year licences) for purposes of setting up as community broadcasters, serving specific information, entertainment and educational needs. Some 120 such licences were issued within the first five years of setting up of the statutory broadcast authority. The unprecedented plethora of community radio stations across the country catering for a characteristically plural South African society opened the doors to several genres of broadcast content, catering for vastly differing community interests. To this end, the Act confirmed establishment of the regulatory authority that would define the parameters and standards, as well as oversee the operations and subscription to broadcast legislation, on the part of the sector.

### **Regulatory Authorities :**

The Independent Broadcasting Authority (later to become the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) with a broader telecommunications portfolio of responsibilities and control) is the regulatory body for community, commercial and the public broadcaster, and whose central task is one of defining and determining frequency assignment, foot-print and operational prerequisites for every Community Radio

Station and other licences it approves. ICASA therefore represents the statutory mechanism for ensuring the proliferation of Community Radio Stations as vehicles for information and educational access for geographically determined urban and rural communities.

The hallmark of the Community Radio sector in South Africa, is the rich diversity of broadcasters, outside of the Public Broadcasting arena, though less overtly political in their disposition, vis a vis their 'pirate predecessors'. ICASA has provided for a broadcast environment that appears less turgid and is predominantly 'development driven'. ICASA's Community Broadcasting Act of 1993 is enormously supportive of community radio as a developmental medium, specifying strict pre-conditions for licence application and broadcast content. In order to protect the integrity of community radio within the ambit of the Community Radio Broadcasting Act, the regulatory authority also places severe constraints on Cross Media Control, as a means of ensuring further the independence and editorial integrity of this sector. For South African purposes, it thus defines as a Community Broadcasting Service, one which:

- is fully controlled by a non-profit entity and carried on for non-profitable purposes;
- serves a particular community with ownership representative of local geographically recognisable communities or of communities of common interest;
- encourages members of the community served by at or persons associated with or promoting the interests of such a community to participate in the selection and provision of programmes in the course of such broadcasting service;
- may be funded by donations, grants, sponsorships or advertising or membership fees, or by any combination of the aforementioned; and

- help promote the right to communicate, assist the free flow of information and opinions, encourage creative expression and contribute to the democratic process and a multicultural society

The civil society counterpart to ICASA in many ways, is the National Community Radio Forum, the umbrella affiliatory body for the South African Community Radio sector, The National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) was launched in 1993, as a national, member-driven association of community radio stations and support service organisations, in order to lobby for the diversification of the airwaves in South Africa, and to foster a dynamic broadcasting environment in the country through the establishment of community radio stations<sup>17</sup>. Its aims and objectives were to :

- promote the ideals, principles and role of community radio, as an integral part of the broadcasting environment of a democratic South Africa
- promote the participation of historically disadvantaged communities in all levels of community radio
- facilitate the establishment and development of community radio stations throughout the country
- encourage networking and cooperation between community radio stations
- advocate the role of community radio within institutions responsible for legislating and regulating broadcasting policy, as well as popularise the value of community radio within the reconstruction and development of South Africa
- promote the production of high quality and innovative programming from diverse sources to serve local programming goals;
- promote democracy, development and empowerment of communities through community radio

With the major focus on educational change at both national and provincial levels, government policy was one of encouraging the use of technology-enhanced teaching and learning, acknowledging the inability of delivering a new curriculum to conventional classrooms. Radio was identified as having an enormous role to play in offering equitable and affordable access to the remotest of rural communities. It was also apparent, that equity of access meant choice of the least constraining technologies, if the historically marginalized communities were to be included in mainstream change. Radio, and community radio in particular, was seen as a powerful vehicle for communities, learners and teachers to access the "new pedagogy" consistent with the transformation programme in the educational sector.

## Community Radio and Educational Transformation in South Africa



In South Africa, a diverse variety of broadcasters exists, outside of the Public Broadcasting arena, though less overtly political in their disposition than their Latin American counterparts.

### **Social sector interventions**

A number of community radio initiatives are directly supportive of government transformation policy in the 'soft sectors' of health, HIV/AIDS information, education, and general information access sectors which by their very nature are immensely susceptible to influence and change from sustained engagement. There has been a perceptible pattern of behavioural shifts, especially of the young, (youth radio constituencies) in local communities, which might be linked to long term broadcast campaigns

around HIV and AIDS prevention. The most popular programme format for these campaigns are dramas, information/infotainment, education/edutainment programmes, magazine, call ins, etc. Inter provincial community disparities are comparable to intra-provincial disparities, and emphasise the appropriateness of community radio for local communities.

Formal education, school-based interventions by radio, have been less common, presumably based upon conventional broadcast wisdom (and presumably pressing financial drivers) of avoiding 'niche broadcasts' especially of the educational variety. Radio is an eminently capable medium for making interventions by way of distance education programming for learners and teachers alike, at an affordable cost and in the context of accruing economies of scale. Developmental costs for such core curriculum programme formats are indeed high<sup>18</sup> but with greater audience/target group numbers, economies of scale are effected, reducing unit costs accordingly. Universal education in South Africa and national teacher development through Inservice programmes, through use of open and distance learning programmes by radio, have been central to the work of a Radio Learning non governmental organization in South Africa, OLSET, using community radio (and the public broadcaster where possible) to offer daily support to teachers and learners in disadvantaged schools countrywide. Curriculum change to a constructivist, outcomes based education (OBE) pedagogy, is perceived by the education authorities, as being the foundation stone to a learning ethos consistent with the demands of the new global knowledge based economy<sup>19</sup>.

The Open Learning Systems Education Trust (OLSET) is an instructive example of the deployment of radio in support of government programmes for providing equitable access to quality education for urban

and remote, marginalized rural communities in South Africa. Distance Education non governmental organizations (NGOs) supporting government efforts in the implementation of the new Outcomes Based Education pedagogy in poor classrooms throughout South Africa, OLSET spearheaded rapid responses to curriculum development and support for thousands of unqualified teachers across the country, in the post 1994 period. Ten years from inception, OLSET is arguably, the largest provider of Distance Learning programmes by radio (and print support) to the country's poorest schools, with a view to enriching the teaching and learning experience in classrooms, and raising the effectiveness of schools.

To achieve this, OLSET negotiated airtime with Community Radio stations amongst others, the Voice of Soweto (4 million target audience) Unitra, Link FM, Voice, Barberton Broadcasting, and a host of community broadcasters in the provinces, ensuring daily broadcasts to schools in seven provinces. The geographic definition of community implies limited signal distribution within the predetermined foot-print, as assigned by the Broadcasting Regulatory Authority, ICASA. The scale and intensity of Radio Learning via Community Radio, is constrained by regulated limitation on signal distribution, in keeping with the 'predefined geographical community'.

With a view to attempting more locally specific broadcasts of the Radio Learning series to deeply remote rural classrooms daily, OLSET entered discussions with the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) for the installation of 'Suitcase Radios' in those areas where neither community nor public broadcasting is available, or is suitable for schooling communities.

Presently, OLSET is working with one of the COL funded radio stations in rural Kwa-Zulu Natal. The progress of this initiative has been hamstrung



by bureaucratic delays and a protracted process of application review and issue of Community Radio licences. It is anticipated that the partnership with COL, will potentially provide a new model for supporting change via local radio, in areas that continue by dint of their remoteness, to be on the periphery of the mainstream.

OLSET is also currently negotiating with COL, support for low cost transmission facilities for the Mongaung Community Radio initiative in the rural Free State province, where schools are geographically dispersed over considerable distances. Radio intervention is ideally suited to this nature of terrain and geographic isolation of communities. Conventional modes of instructional delivery and teacher support are impractical if not unaffordable in such conditions, and distance learning programmes by radio have proven their ability to impact the education of learners and teachers effectively. Mongaung Community Radio is an anomaly in that it has secured an ICASA licence; a not inconsiderable achievement, for reasons discussed earlier in this paper, but lacks the financial resources to procure the much needed transmitter for going to air. COL support by way of prototype, powerful yet cost effective Suitcase Radio unit, will in partnership with OLSET's Radio Learning Programme, effectively make access to community specific educational broadcasts a reality, to some of the most information and resource-starved communities in this province. The Mongaung Community Radio initiative will serve as the litmus test for International Agency partnerships with local community based NGO providers, in ensuring access to social development programmes via local community radio initiatives.

Critical to the Community Radio Station/NGO partnerships in effecting Radio Learning for local communities, has been the immensely supportive

partnerships with the British Department for International Development (DFID) and the Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD). OLSET has been able to embark upon a bold programme of providing Radio Learning broadcasts and training of teachers through Inservice work-shopping, in the severely under-resourced, urban and remote rural communities of schools. The main plank to OLSET and its Distance Education interventions in the delivery of the new OBE curriculum, inservice support and capacity building for teachers, has been the multiple stakeholder partnership comprising Community Radio (and PBS) stations, Provincial Departments of Education, national and international broadcasters, such as the SABC and BBC, and the indispensable International Donor Agencies mentioned above..

Radio Learning Programmes need not constitute stand-alone broadcasts to schools, as per conventional radio broadcast traditions in South Africa and on the continent. Broadcasts are additionally supported by: Inservice Teacher Development workshops; Teacher Support Groups; lesson observations and monitoring and integrated teaching and learner and teacher support materials. The OLSET Radio Learning approach is to deliver interactive learning programmes that allow both learners and teachers to engage in quality outcomes based learning experiences as directed by the South African Curriculum 2005 model. This is achieved through the use of innovative radio instructional design that provides for greater learner participation whilst simultaneously engaging teachers in accepted best practices. The programmes are designed to afford the teacher an array of innovative teaching methodologies within the OBE framework.

The use of radio as the primary medium of instruction is a key element of this programme. Its accessibility in all areas of the country as well as

tailored broadcasts for specific schooling communities can be achieved through close networking with the umbrella Community Radio Forum, is a familiar technology to both teachers and learners. Hence, the teachers are engaged through a medium they are comfortable with, more especially on the local radio service, within their own classroom environment during a lesson. This offers a number of benefits; the teachers are not threatened or marginalised by high level technology; inappropriate resource levels; stand-alone broadcasts, or external nationally focused 'experts'. This distance education training is classroom and activity-based, reinforced on a daily basis by the broadcasts. In addition, the radio medium is highly cost effective with low recurrent cost implications.

Radio creates a 'classroom chemistry' difficult to be replicated solely by a teacher or by print medium. Interactivity and learner participation warrant utilization of music, dance, drama, games and other activities, if learner centred pedagogies are to be implemented, and learning made fun particularly for primary school. A critical element of delivering OBE is student participation. The OLSET Radio programmes are designed to engage learners more actively in the learning process through the use of music, drama, games, song etc. In addition, in a case study conducted in 1995, teacher focus groups consistently reported a significant increase in students' attendance in schools offering the OLSET programme<sup>20</sup>.

Apart from being a well-placed medium for outreach, radio possesses intrinsic strengths and advantages for educational purposes, where the power of audio in brightening up instructional design, heralds a new paradigm. With the high dropout rates in Sub Saharan schools where more than 130 million primary school age children, between 6-11 years, are out of school and some 80 million or 60 per cent of them are girls. (FAWE

2002), radio's capacity to impact upon greater learner participation in the learning process and (hopefully) subsequent retention rates in primary schools, warrants closer scrutiny in the light of the South African Radio Learning Programme evaluation findings. (Potter et al, 1994)

## HIV and AIDS Education by Radio

UN estimates of the number of people living with HIV/AIDS world-wide are put at 36.1 million. Of these, some 25.3 million (or some 70% of the world total) live in sub Saharan Africa<sup>20</sup>. Coupled with an alarmingly low literacy rate of approximately 41% among the over 15 age group population in the region, this situation makes for a bleak outlook, undermining capacity in all sectors of the economy in the region, with education delivery severely jeopardized at precisely a juncture when it is evidently in need of massive infusions of learner and teacher support, and quality educational instructional resources, to increase effectiveness of schooling systems. Research indicating the corrosive effect of this crisis on the health status and life expectancy of the population, and the multiplier impact on poverty elimination and educational renewal, impede prospects of economic recovery for the region. Information and educational programmes accessible to out of school learners, the sick and ailing, confined to their homes, and the school age children for whom tending their ailing family members instead of attending school, have become paramount in communities needing counselling and guidance through what is an unprecedented epidemic.

Community Radio services are increasingly intervening in the crisis, and proving indispensable in the battle against AIDS and ignorance about the



pandemic. The profile of sexual health information and related issues has been raised enormously, and are discussed considerably more on local community radio stations, than has been commonplace hitherto.

Community Radio phone ins, on air counsellors, public awareness campaigns using local opinion leaders and public personalities to inform and educate with a view to reversing trends that contribute to the pandemic, are a major boost in the war against the disease. Now more than ever, a plethora of Community Radio stations providing information and education lifelines to marginalized communities, woefully under-served by the commercial or public broadcaster, is of paramount importance in South Africa, and indeed the region.



## Challenges Confronting Community Radio Services in South Africa

Sustainability of the Community Radio sector is directly impacted by a multiplicity of social and material factors, not least of which is the financial imperative. Comprising an intrinsic strand of the non-profit broadcasting sector and operating in a highly competitive, often volatile commercial environment, vying with the commercial and public broadcaster for listenership, the fortunes of the Community broadcaster tend to be perpetually wanting. In the absence of state subsidies (unlike the public broadcaster) or 'in-kind support', many operate precariously at the edge of insolvency, on minimal budgets. The net effect of functioning in chronically austere financial environments is most keenly felt at the level of day to day operational issues, compounding already challenging mission objectives.

In that Community Radio by its very nature is located in poorly resourced communities, drawing upon locally available, largely unskilled personnel for day to day operation, clearly places them at a disadvantage from the outset. The constraints of human and material resources predictably impact on the length, quality and intensity of their training (mandate) necessary for building capacity of the standard required for effective broadcast practice. By all accounts, a persistent lack of capacity cuts across the areas of station management, financial administration, audio production, broadcast scheduling and management, and programme development, to name a few. Without the necessary coordinated input and the resources to make this possible, many community broadcasters are forced to divide attention between competing needs, hence providing a less than optimal service, for the very communities they were ostensibly set up to cater for. More commonly, stations have little choice but to resort to 'volunteers' in order to remain operational, with the attendant pitfalls such practice entails. Paradoxically, the turnover of post-trained personnel tends to be inordinately high. Scarce resources notwithstanding, the sector provides skills development programmes, as much as is possible. Somewhat perversely, local community stations serve as recruitment grounds for the considerably better resourced public and commercial broadcast sector.

In the absence of subsidies from government or other public institutions, the corporate sector comprises the primary source of income generation for community radio, most commonly through programme sponsorship. In the South African scenario, where a major state driven social transformation programme has been underway post 1994, one which the corporate sector has yet to significantly embrace, such revenue streams are invariably closed to the community broadcaster. Persisting conservative private sector

perceptions and subsequent marketing trends remain at best, elitist and nouveau riche focused. The predominant community broadcaster audience is not the target of such advertising, nor are these stations perceived as appropriate vehicles for such consumer messages. Community radio broadcasters continue to grapple with the endemic financial austerity, and cyclical tensions between skills development needs, and financial wants. In the interim, a not inconsiderable number of licences, mandates to broadcast, are under or unutilized and has a direct bearing on local communities, denying them the right to access information and educational broadcast services, enshrined in the national broadcast policy.

## Conclusion

Some 120 community radio stations in South Africa currently provide a major unprecedented radio network and footprint, for local communities across the country. At a juncture when the combination of the past and the present ravages of previous social, most especially educational policy, and as the inexorable spread of the HI Virus approximates on endemic proportions, access to information and programming relevant to the daily lives of local communities, are without exaggeration, life and death issues. The pandemic prevalence of this crisis throughout the sub Saharan region, means a similar role for Community Radio initiatives regionally

The power, relevance and outreach of community radio in the developing world, are all too evident, despite the frugal existence of many in this sector. Until the advent of widespread access to ICTs for the significant majority of communities across the developing world is realized, radio, and community radio more pertinently, will in all likelihood, constitute the sole, affordable, ubiquitous wireless information technology, cell telephony advances notwithstanding. Alluring though the internet and high end ICTs may prove on either side of the digital divide, it is arguable that access to these technologies in immediate to medium term for under-resourced communities, remains substantially out of reach. There is a certain irony, often missed, that the Internet's resplendent, multifold access to all manner of information in the ether has also reinvented radio, giving it a new lease of life. For the developing world and Africa in particular, the cheaper route to radio, community radio, will be traversed for some time yet in the foreseeable future.





## NOTES



- 1 Van der Walt, J. – Screen Africa – June 2001
- 2 Bruce Girard – Mixing Media – the Internet’s Real Next Generation (2002)
- 3 Mike Jensen – “Bridging the Digital Divide in the 21st Century” UNICTTF 2002.
- 4 UNESCO World Communications and Information Report (1999- 2000).
- 5 Jensen (ibid)
- 6 Forward Looking Approaches and Innovative Strategies to Promote the Development of Africa in the 21st Century. UNESCO (Nov 2001)
- 7 World Communication and Information Report – UNESCO (1999-2000)
- 8 New Partnership for Africa’s development – 2001
- 9 Forward Looking Approaches and Innovative Strategies to Promote the Development of Africa in the 21st Century UNESCO (2001)
- 10 NEPAD – Preconditions to Development (2001)
- 11 UNESCO 2001 (ibid)
- 12 World Declaration on Education for All – Jomtien 1990 – UNESCO
- 13 Forum for African Women Educationists Report – FAWE (2002)
- 14 Jensen M, (ibid)
- 15 Independent Broadcast Authority, Johannesburg, 1993
- 16 AMARC 2000
- 17 NCRF Constitution 1996
- 18 “Basic Education Crisis in Developing Countries”: Edirisingha P, 2000.
- 19 Outcomes Based Education – Curriculum 2005 – Johannesburg 1996
- 20 UNESCO 2001 (ibid)