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The Role of Community Radio in Livelihood Improvement: The Case of Simli Radio

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Abstract. The present study focuses on the contribution of Simli Radio to the livelihood improvement of the people in the Tolon-Kumbungu District of the Northern Region of Ghana. A multi-stage sampling technique was used to select 12 communities for the study. Data were gathered on the use of broadcasting as an educational tool, the promotion of traditional culture, communication and information sharing, entertainment and income promotion. The study established that Simli Radio has worked to improve awareness and knowledge of solutions to community development problems ranging from culture, rural development, education, hygiene and sanitation, agriculture to local governance. The station has been an appropriate medium that has facilitated an interface between duty bearers and rights holders. It has promoted small and medium enterprise development by creating market opportunities for Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) operators and consequently improved sales and incomes. It is recommended that regular feedback from the listening public is essential in identifying listeners' preferences and the taste of various listeners segments (youth, women, men, aged, etc) and to avoid politics and religion.

Keywords. Simli Radio, Dalun, livelihood improvement, community development.

1 Introduction

The provision of information and skills has gained popularity in the quest to empower communities with Community Radio as a unique and effective tool. Chapman *et al.* (2003) reported that the growth of rural radio stations reflects both the improvements in information technologies and the shifting of development paradigm towards a more participatory style of information and knowledge transfer. Kumar (2004) identified radio as an avenue for participatory communication and as a tool relevant in both economic and social development.

Community radio is a type of radio service that offers a model of radio broadcasting beyond commercial and public service. Community radio broadcasting serves geographic communities and communities' interest. The content of broadcasting is largely popular and relevant to a local/specific audience but which may often be overlooked by commercial or mass-media broadcasters. Community radio stations are operated, owned, and driven by the communities they serve. Community radio is not-for profit and provides a mechanism for facilitating individuals, groups, and communities to tell their own diverse stories, to share experiences, and in a media rich world to become active creators and contributors of media. In many parts of the world today,

community radio acts as a vehicle for the community and voluntary sector, civil society, agencies, NGOs and citizens to work in partnership to promote community development. By the core aims and objectives of this model of broadcasting, community radio stations often serve their listeners by offering a variety of content that is not necessarily provided by the larger commercial radio stations.

Community radio can play a significant role at the grass roots level for rural development. For instance, issues of poverty, agriculture, gender inequality, education, social problems among others could be the focus for programming. In exploring the importance of sharing information locally and the opening up of wider information networks for farmers in Northern Ghana with reference to vernacular radio programmes, Chapman *et al.* (2003) found that rural radio is effective in improving the sharing of agricultural information by remote rural farming communities. Radio in this regard provides a set of participatory communication techniques that support agricultural extension efforts by using local languages to communicate directly with farmers and listeners' groups. Using the Most Significant Change (MSC) process, Walters *et al.* (2011) assessed the impact of community radio in Indonesia and concluded that effective radio activities can make a significant change in a community's life. The MSC methodology has its origins in community health development debates. It has recently been applied to community radio impact evaluation. By the MSC process,

community members provide feedback in the form of stories describing the desirable change in their life as a result of the activities of the radio.

Through media skills training and access to the airwaves, a community radio facilitates a number of capacity building activities. The exchange of information, networking of groups, the provision of skills and training and these undoubtedly are key elements of developing a community. Again, a radio facility for a community facilitates the promotion of awareness of community groups and facilities in the area as well as providing the avenue for the empowerment of these groups to use radio to promote themselves and to speak directly to the community. For its proximate location to its clients a Community Radio serves a local community of its interest. It is accessible to the community in terms of ownership, decision making and programme output. In majority of cases, programming is produced by the community, with focus on local concerns and issues. Unlike in the case of the mainstream media, rather than merely talking about the community, the people themselves make the programmes. This strengthens local culture with the recognition that this is their station; it becomes a forum for a wide diversity of local opinions and views. Sterling *et al.* (2007) provided evidence that female community radio listeners are given a voice with which to respond to programming and to create programming content. The authors estimated the cost of excluding women from ICT for development and explored how community radio represents an opportunity for inclusion. By employing the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the authors found that women will be more likely to benefit from technology-mediated opportunities for development if they themselves produce information that contributes to their advancement, rather than simply consuming information provided by others (Sterling *et al.* 2007).

Simli Radio is a community radio station located in a small rural community, Dalun, within the Tolon-Kumbungu District of the Northern Region of Ghana. It was established in 1996 under the Ghanaian Danish Community Programme (GDGP), an integrated rural development programme. The overall strategy of GDGP has been to promote integrated rural development that will create an enabling environment for constructive dialoguing between duty bearers and rights holders; thus giving voice to the vulnerable and excluded to demand for and claim their rights. Simli Radio was established to complement the efforts of the first three sectors (Community Projects, Dagbon Ninneesim Karim Zong (DNK), and Simli Pong (SP)) by giving more information on the activities of the GDGP, recording the gains made, and performing the role of an extension education unit. The Radio is located about 37 km away from Tamale, the capital of the Northern Region, in Dalun. The sector was also funded by Danida till the end of December 2008 when it became totally independent (Simli Radio, 2010).

Livelihood is defined to include capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living (OECD, 2001). Economic theory postulates that Community Radio, to a large extent, if effectively organized, performs three main significant functions at the grass root level for rural development. Firstly, it promotes issues of agriculture, gender equality, education,

trade and commerce, disaster, weather, natural calamities, poverty and social problems. Community radio is usually for the people, run by the people and owned by the people. Secondly, it enhances the capacities of local people to work together to tackle a range of social problems, including poverty and exclusion through radio. Lastly, it contributes to nurturing of the creative talents of the community and providing a forum for a diversity of opinions and information.

The extent to which Simli Radio contributes to improving the livelihood situation of its listeners is not well documented. This study examines the role of Simli Radio in livelihood change. Another objective of the paper is to analyze the challenges facing Simli Radio as well as lessons to be derived from its operations over the last six years. The rest of the paper presents the conceptual framework of the relationship between communication and rural development, the study methodology, findings, challenges and lessons. The last part deals with conclusions and recommendations.

2 Methodology

The study was carried out as an in-depth evaluation using participatory approaches. The approach involved desk study and field visits. The desk study reviewed studies already carried out. The field study was designed to allow staff of Simli Radio to participate fully in the process. The specific techniques used to collect data were meetings, focus group discussions, stakeholder interviews, debriefing sessions and observations.

The GDGP programme covered 518 communities in two districts, Tolon-Kumbungu and Savelugu-Nanton. A multi-stage sampling technique was used. In the first stage, 4 zones and 2 zones were sampled from a total of 6 zones each in the Tolon-Kumbungu and Savelugu-Nanton districts respectively. The second stage involved the sampling of 4 skins¹ from 17 skins in Tolon-Kumbungu district and 4 skins from 20 skins in Savelugu-Nanton district. The third and final stage involved the selection of communities and this was guided by five factors. The first was communities that host projects relevant to all three sectors of the GDGP, namely, DNK, Simli Pong or Women and loans and Simli Radio. The second factor was the size of the community (small or larger community measured by population) whereas the third guiding factor dealt with whether the community was a new or old friendship community. The remaining two factors were availability of satellite centers and convenience in terms of transport accessibility. In all, 7 communities were selected from Tolon-Kumbungu and 5 communities from Savelugu-Nanton districts bringing the total number of sampled communities to 12. Details of the sampled communities are presented in Table 1.

Specifically, data were gathered on the use of broadcasting as an educational tool, for the promotion of traditional culture, for communication/information sharing, for entertainment and income promotion through focused group discussions. In all, 12 focused group discussions were held (one in each community). The selection of sampled communities was purposive because they fell within the project catchment area.

¹ Paramouncy under the Dagbon Kingdom is referred to as a Skin.

Table 1. Sampled Communities

No	COMMUNITY	SKIN	DISTRICT
1.	Dalun	Dalun	Tolon-Kumbungu
2.	Kukuo		
3.	Kumbungu	Kumbungu	
4.	Nyenkpala	Nyenkpala	
5.	Kpalsogu		
6.	Kasuliyili	Kasuliyili	
7.	Wantugu		
8.	Diare	Diare	Savelugu-Nanton
9.	Nambagla		
10.	Dipali	Gushee	
11.	Zoggu	Zoggu	
12.	Tampion-Gushee	Tampion	

3 Findings

3.1 Education and Livelihood Improvement

Simli Radio has been used to improve awareness and knowledge of solutions to community development problems within various sectors including culture, rural development, education, hygiene and sanitation, agriculture and local governance among rural people living in the Dagbani speaking districts in particular.

There is increased enrolment in school through the School for Life (SfL)² literacy programmes being broadcast on the station; reduced out-migration by young girls (Kayaayo³) due to the station's enlightenment and an increased use of fertilizers by farmers (Simli Radio, 2010). This finding particularly the adoption of good and modern agricultural practices is in agreement with the conclusion by Chapman *et al.* (2003) that rural radio is effective in improving the sharing of agricultural information by remote rural farming communities. There has also been increased awareness on hygiene and sanitation issues in the sampled communities as well as enhanced social cohesion, manifesting itself in several ways including friendship and conflict reduction. More so, listeners have been able to broaden their horizon of knowledge through the opportunity provided to them by the radio in terms of broadcasting international news.

² School for Life is a functional literacy programme run by the umbrella organization GDCA.

³ Kayaayo refers to the phenomenon of young girls engaging in menial jobs as head portage in Accra and other cities. The girls usually migrate from the Northern Regions to the Southern parts of Ghana.

3.2 Communication and Information Sharing

Simli Radio has served as an important link between GDPC's other sectors (DNK, Women and Loans and Community Projects) and as such, has promoted the other sectors very well. Through its (Simli Radio) strategy of communal listenership, more than 100 communities have formed listeners clubs across the two administrative districts in the Northern Region. Listeners' clubs have a major role in the design and running of programmes (Simli Radio, 2010). They listen and are able to track programmes and make inputs as to what should be encouraged or changed. This promotes ownership and relevance of programmes to the people. Listeners identify themselves with the programmes and listeners clubs are a valid indicator of radio reception. This finding about Simli Radio finds support with the assertion of Sterling *et al.* (2007) that Community Radio provides listeners with the voice with which to respond to programming and to create programming content. Indeed, Simli Radio has considerable impact on listeners in the communities.

The programmes are popular and the listeners are inspired to improve upon their family's daily life. Especially the recordings from the communities and the direct access listeners have to the radio were found to catch the listeners' priorities. Most people found that Simli Radio programmes concerned their lives more than other radio programmes, due to the fact that they could identify well with the presenters and the programmes made directly in the communities.

The station (Simli Radio) wields a lot of influence. It informs the people about what is happening in all the sectors of GDPC. It would be very difficult to know what is going on without the radio. The radio serves as the foundation and it is marketing the other sectors. For instance, an opinion leader in Wantugu, Mallam Abu, said in a one-on-one interview that, "we now know more about development in the other communities and how to get development ourselves. More so, without the radio it is like someone has taken your food away!"

With the expansion of its activities to include the review of newspapers in the mornings, Simli Radio has provided a new dimension to serving its constituents. The people listen in groups and take notice of issues raised and sometimes call in to make their opinions known. In a focus group discussion at Dalun, a participant, Afa Saakibu, narrated how he benefited from Simli Radio. He said, "It tells us what happens in the country; the role models, big men, the president, etc. It gives us links to the outside world, too. News make us aware of what is currently happening in our district and also at the national level".

3.3 Decentralization and Local Governance

The activities of Simli Radio have given further meaning to decentralization and local governance. An appropriate medium has been created to facilitate an interface between duty bearers and rights holders, especially for the people in the two operational districts of Simli Radio. The interactive sessions provided by the station for local authorities to explain government policies and programmes is a clear case of the

promotion of accountability and transparency. The people get the opportunity to question certain actions and commissions of the authorities through the “listeners’ comments” sessions, a means of collating feedback from listeners. For instance, Parliamentarians and other leaders in those communities are now put on their toes because of radio broadcasting. In response to a question on how duty bearers relate with the masses, a woman leader, Asheitu explained as follows: “We can now talk to our Members of Parliament (MPs) through the radio. We now know that the MPs are there for development; they can no more cheat and have to bring development to our communities. Hither to, they went to Accra and would not remember we voted them but now Simli Radio calls on them and bring them closer”.

The traditional decision making process at the family level in the study area (Dagbon) has limited room for female voices. As the incomes of women engaged in Income Generating Activities (IGA) have been enhanced with the help of the promotional activities of Simli Radio, there is increasing acceptance of women’s views in matters that affect not only the family but the community as well. The daily programmes aired on Simli Radio have helped to “soften” the grounds for female voices to be heard in and across the Dagbon state on some topical issues that affect the family and community generally.

3.4 Cultural Promotion and Entertainment

The radio has established itself as an important cultural and educational institution in the Dagbon traditional area. The reputation is still growing due to the improvement of the reception around Karaga, Gushegu and Yendi (Simli Radio, 2010). The attraction is particularly strong in the rural areas where the vast majority of the population has no other media that they are able to understand. More than 90 percent of the population, including children, listens to radio even though they do not necessarily have their own radio receivers. Programmes such as *Yung Dema Saha (Community Entertainment)* and *Salima Saha (Story Telling)* are so indigenous in their design and broadcast. Due to modernity the traditional storytelling and communal entertainments are fast being replaced by modern forms of entertainment for the youth. Within the catchment area therefore, the station is reinvigorating these forms of traditional entertainments that held the people together.

In describing the relevance of the radio, a community youth leader, Zakaria Yehuza, participating in a group level discussion observed that “what makes Simli Radio unique is that it has made life better and meaningful than before. Everybody likes it and becomes worried whenever the station is not operating. Simli Radio is a station without equal”. The radio broadcasts mainly in local language (Dagbani). This is serving the interest of majority of the listening public because it promotes culture. Another advantage is that it encourages high level participation given the high illiteracy rate in the catchment area. However, the use of local language denies students who claim to learn English vocabulary from radio discussions.

3.5 Income through Increased Economic Activity

The activities of Simli Radio have promoted the economic activities of its clients in and around the catchment area. It has promoted Small and Medium Enterprise (SMEs) development. The station has provided a forum for SMEs to reach out to the larger population by undertaking advertisements at very affordable fees. The station’s business promotion segment is aired for two hours daily between the hours of 10:00 and 12:00 mid-day from Monday to Thursday. This business promotion time is time reserved for general business advertisements and promotional activities for SMEs and artisans who have trained at the DNK to explain their products and services. Business owners said they use the radio to advertise their goods and services leading to increased sales and revenue. This phenomenon in the area is a novelty as small business operators hither to had to commute door to door in order to reach out to customers and clients. A herbalist, Mba Alaasani who has benefited in this regard testified that it was now easy to create awareness of his products as he simply needs to contact the Community Based Producer (CBP) within his community. He asserted that “the message travels far and wide as soon as Simli Radio gets it. The radio has changed my life and my business fortunes; I have been able to advertise my services as a herbalist which has raised my daily sales by 90%. I used to spend about 3 days to get messages to some villages but now it is a matter of seconds. Simli Radio has brought to me improved living condition”.

3.6 Social Cohesion

Programmes designed on topical issues have further endeared Simli Radio to the people. The station engages experts/resource persons as guests on these programmes and they (resource persons) are able to explain and make clear issues in their areas of expertise. Major areas include family life, moral education, gender and social inclusion, domestic violence, conflicts and conflict resolution, peace building, etc. On the programme guide of the station, *Tehisuma Saha (Morality Talk Show)* and *Ti-Bom-Yem (Let’s Seek Knowledge)* are programmes designed to promote social cohesion. Resource persons chosen from within the area are used to discuss these issues in the local language.

A listener at Zoggu, Ibrahim Musa heaped a lot of praises for what the station was doing and narrated his satisfaction for the moral education sessions of the programme as follows: “Through the moral education programme the Assemblyman educates us so well; it brings peace to the family. Most woman who were misbehaving have changed from bad to good as result of listening to Simli Radio. The programme gives us advice and how to live a happy life together at home and in the community. As married men we have a responsibility and Simli Radio keeps telling us the adults, our roles”. Also, Dawuda Wumbei in a discussion said that, “the family life session talks about women issues which make us behave well at home and the Friday Islamic programmes make me morally good.

Simli Radio through its sports programmes has also contributed to peace building and conflict resolution in the study area. Respondents said they have benefited immensely from the sports activities of the station. A participant in a focus group discussion summarized this point by saying that, “the sports programme has unified us. Before now, we were fighting during football matches, but no more. Simli Radio has enlightened us and this will bring development. Football is very useful for the youth; it unifies us and engages us in the dry season” (Shahadu, Dalun Community).

This level of appreciation by the people is in line with view of Walters *et al.* (2011) that effective radio activities can make a significant change in a community’s life. Of course the Northern Region is noted for its instability due to frequent occurrence of inter-ethnic and religious conflicts. Through the activities of Simli Radio, the people are encouraged to peacefully coexist at the family and community levels. People are now able to go about their daily social and economic activities in an atmosphere of peace and happiness.

3.7 Challenges facing Simli Radio

The wider nature of the operational area of Simli Radio poses the challenge of effective coordination of activities. The station’s local agents, CBPs serve as liaisons between listeners and the station but most communities are yet to have their own CBPs. The absence of these CBPs in these communities makes it costly for the people to send their views and announcements to the station.

The radio has faced leadership difficulties. It has remained a big challenge to get a Station Manager (SIMLI RADIO). The absence of such a figure has negatively affected service delivery and management of the station. Also, there is a high tendency of disappearance of radio programmes after individual presenters leave the organisation. This is a result of the error of building programmes around single individuals (e.g., Nafisah’s programme on women issues ended soon after she left the radio). Happenings in the external environment have influenced Simli Radio tremendously. The station could not meet its target of the social programmes because of power outage. In 2008 the station was closed down due to political reasons. The mast was also brought down by storm leading to the closure of the station. The bad nature of the road network also affect accessibility of radio services in terms of sending announcements to the station. This is worsened by the absence of the CBPs in most parts of the area.

3.8 Lessons learnt from Simli Radio

Radio FM stations that try to remain a-political and non-partisan, especially in conflict prone areas have greater impact in delivery of services. Effective management and leadership are critical in ensuring the performance of every organization, particularly those involving radio stations such as Simli Radio. Leadership is key for mobilizing resources, directing programme activities and evaluation of programme impact.

4 Conclusions

Simli Radio has really served as one of the communication channels in Ghana that has encouraged target communities to participate in programme activities and replicate skills acquired. Simli Radio should continue to play its role well by encouraging its listening communities in Tolon-Kumbungu and Savelugu-Nanton Districts to keep faith and support to the station. The Radio has had social, economical, political and cultural impact in the programme districts. The station has largely been used as a tool for integrated rural development. The station has operated within its mandate as a community radio with a social responsibility of providing community news bulletins, current affairs, sporting, culture and health programmes.

There is a very high degree of listener participation in the programmes, and the rural audience likes to hear themselves and their neighbours. Although listeners in Tolon-Kumbungu District said they have limited choice of radio services Simli Radio has become a popular radio FM station for many people in the Northern Region. The radio is highly praised. Started as a small radio programmes production unit in the GDCP, today Simli Radio has achieved the goal of becoming a community radio. In terms of ownership community members feel they are part of the ownership because their suggestions or recommendations have been heeded to by staff of the station. They also participate in the programmes by way of making announcements and advertisement.

5 Recommendations

Regular feedback from the listening public is essential in order to identify listeners’ preferences. The taste of various listeners (youth, women, men, aged, etc) should be taken into consideration. Programmes should be designed to include environmental issues. The listening public needs education on environmental protection. Particularly, programmes related to environmental issues should stress on land degradation, indiscriminate tree felling, waste management, soil erosion, desertification and climate change and how all these impact on peoples’ livelihood. Missed out programmes should be brought back. Listeners do not like interruptions in programmes they term as very entertaining and educative. There should be less interruption by radio presenters so as to improve upon programme quality. News or announcement must be properly edited before they are broadcast. There is the need to re-organize the listeners clubs and strengthen CBPs. The network of these community groups is a reflection of the character of a community radio by its legal status (Simli Radio Report, 2010). For Community Radio to be able to play this important and significant role in community development, it must keep out of politics and religion and highlight on gender issues.

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