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Community-Based Radio For Ecological Conservation And Protection

by

Fr. Francisco B Lucas
INTRODUCTION

A small tropical haven in the South Pacific is graced with the five beautiful yet fragile ecosystems: lush forests, lowlands, rivers, marshes and ocean. It is an isolated area nestled between the Sierra Madre mountains and the Pacific Ocean. It takes five hours to cover the 160-kilometer distance from Manila due to the unfavorable condition of the mountain roads.

The pace of life is slow for the 36,000 people of this community. The people are poor in monetary terms but strong in spirit. Their home is called Infanta, after the newborn baby Jesus.

Since the 1950s, Infanta had been the site of commercial logging because of its vast forest cover. However, in 1986, there was a lull in big commercial logging in that area. Logging permits were withdrawn because only about 21% of the forests remained in the whole of Quezon. However, from 1988 on, disregarding the law, commercial loggers continued transporting up to twenty truckloads of logs from this area daily.

In 1989, disaster struck. Two days of continuous rain fell and inundated the whole town of Infanta. Ninety three percent of the crops were destroyed, 200 houses were swept away by floods and 17 people were buried by mud flows. Such destructive power had never been experienced in Infanta.
Logging, no doubt, was the main reason for the massive flooding. But how could the poor, ordinary farmers and fisherfolk of Infanta stop the powerful loggers from further destroying their lives?

This is a story of communication development. This is a story of the people's participation. This is a story about a poor isolated town in the Philippines where a community-based radio has made the difference.

COMMUNITY BASED RADIO: FACILITATOR AND CATALYST

Infanta, though small, is home to DZJO-AM radio station which is the only local station in the area. It also has an active community development center - a non-governmental organization (NGO) called Infanta Community Development Administration, Inc. (ICDAI) - which is also an active member of Philippine Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in the Rural Areas (PHILDHRRA) and Green Forum Philippines. This community has formed various People's Organizations consisting of different rural folks. The radio station, the NGO, and the grassroots organizations complement each other in their efforts towards a common goal: "People-Centered, Life-Centered Development," more familiarly known now as "People's Empowerment".

When Infanta's Community Development Radio began in 1969, it was only a rough model of communication development media. Before, people thought "less information equals less power"; this is correct. They also thought that more information equals more power; this is not necessarily true. It is not true because it depends on the selection of information given and its packaging. Moreover, the issue is access to media, not just access to information.

People's participation is invoked with media being made accessible to the public. This enables them to let their problems be known and eventually find the corresponding solutions.
The two-fold role of CBR is then achieved: that of being a facilitator and a catalyst. The radio facilitates the sharing, exchange and development of ideas and effects changes within the community through sectoral and multi-sectoral encounters.

PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION: THREE STAGES

Traditionally, mass media was and still is used for one-way communication, which is from the radio out to the listeners. In the community based radio model of communication, which makes access to media and people's participation possible, there are three stages or processes: information, formation and transformation. Community-based radio can play a vital role at all three stages.

The information stage includes all kinds of hard data. News programs have always offered this and community-based radio is no exception. CBR pays special attention to the contents of the news as it is field-generated and not merely field-based.

The second stage is the formation, or analysis stage. CBR is specially effective at this stage because it offers members of the community a forum to discuss their views and in turn, help form public opinion. It is at this stage that problems are transformed into issues which are then analyzed, discussed and resolved. The development of issues is essential if transformation, the final and most important stage, is ever to be reached.

Transformation signifies an actual change in behavior which is ideally collective. This is the ultimate goal of any awareness-raising done in the name of community development. CBR effects mobilization, reflection, and values clarification. Moreover, this is the level that needs to be reached with concern to environmental issues such as the protection and conservation of the ecology.
THE FOUR LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION

As with other issues, the typical road to mobilization among the grassroots level starts on the person to person level. Concerned citizen groups with some government personnel initiate consciousness-raising by word of mouth going house to house and conducting participative research and surveys. This is the first stage of developing communication within a community.

The second level uses micro-media, which is small group media. This can take place in the classrooms, and community-sponsored workshops and meetings. In the case of Infanta, concerned citizen groups of NGOs and church/human helped increase public awareness through environmental workshops and stage plays focusing on the dangers of large-scale logging, illegal fishing, and other ecological concerns. These first two levels of communication are the backbone of community development at the grassroots level.

The third and fourth levels of communication concern mass media on the local and national levels. These levels' importance is its potential for massive reach. Although mass media can and should play a central role in development, it must be realized that it can only do so in conjunction with the groups working at the grassroots level.

PROGRAM FORMATS

Community Based Radio becomes effective when the programs aired flow with the pulse of the people. This means that the topics discussed are relevant to the listeners, the news items include local events and that the programs are in tune with emotions, needs and, on the whole, the situation of the people.

The radio station responds to people's needs and tries to address their problems. These are generally on the personal or individual level. However, when the problem becomes collective, it is then considered a
social issue. If a radio station responds to issues, people will sacrifice entertainment because these issues make up a big part of their lives.

However, the radio station does not solve these issues directly. It merely adopts a relational newscasting format wherein all the different elements of the issues are presented in a straightforward manner. The relation of these elements is established by the people through public opinion formation.

In the case of drama programs, communication research shows that this is the most preferred radio program format in Third World countries like the Philippines where the people are poor and emotional. Drama programs appeal to the the poor people's sentiments, and they also provide them with temporary relief from their work and problems. In the same way, CBR adopts formats which are based on the listeners' actual preferences and needs which precisely make them appealing.

Station DZJO airs various programs such as a children's show, a radio school on the air, women's program and an agricultural program to name a few. BAYANIHAN, which means community-building in Tagalog, is the station's news and public affairs show. Because of the program's people-centered, participative approach, it becomes interesting. It is this program that plays the most influential role in terms of raising people's awareness about environmental and political issues.

BAYANIHAN uses a myriad of formats to keep the listeners tuned in. The program is aired four times during the course of the day. It is a service program based on the people's needs. It provides free and faster communication service through broadcasting important messages received. This service makes the program very popular. At times, an open forum format is used which allows local citizens the opportunity to discuss the issues on the air and work out solutions to the problems affecting their community. Editorials, interviews, analysis, jokes, and music are all included. The program is a collage of various formats;
anything found to suit the people's interests makes the show lively and entertaining.

PROGRAMMING GUIDELINES

DZJO's radio programming aims towards the total human development of the people. The first guiding principle of the station is its community-based approach in all of its programs. The topics discussed in its programs are the same issues confronting its listeners. DZJO aims to get all the people in the community involved, which is why a single issue may be discussed in all of its programs, as in the case of ecology. News, musical and even children's programs would include topics pertaining to the environment.

There is often skepticism that low-budget radio station such as DZJO can not compete with the powerful stations broadcasting from the metropolitan area. However, the community-based approach also gives the small, local station important advantages which must be fully utilized. The station is more in-tune with the needs and interests of the local people. The larger stations often have no concept of what is really relevant to the people living outside the center. There has been no organized method for the people in the rural areas to give information directly to the center; and they certainly have not had access to regional or national media. If ever this kind of information were to move from the periphery to the center, it would have already been manipulated, mangled or simply repackaged.

Giving people access to the medium itself is another important trait of community-based or people-based radio. The aim is not simply to inform the people. It also services the community by helping people analyze and organize themselves around the issues which directly relate to their lives. The community-based radio is then also able to compete with the larger stations because it is not just following their format on a smaller scale but adopts an entirely different approach leading to better communication between all sectors of society.
ROLE OF CBR IN THE LOGGING ISSUE

The role of community-based radio in the communication development process and its effectiveness was manifested during all the stages which led to the implementation of the total logging ban in Infanta. With the help of community-based radio, this small, seemingly insignificant town has been able to organize itself around various issues such as logging. The mobilization started at the grassroots level of communication and moved through local and national media. The people-centered, community-based radio acted as a catalyst and a facilitator at all stages of mobilization. With media being made accessible, public opinion was formed and policy-implementation was ultimately achieved.

As previously mentioned, the general awareness among the people about environmental issues had been heightened before the massive flooding occurred. A certain amount of consciousness raising about the detrimental effects of excess logging on the environment had already taken place before the catastrophic flood by way of information dissemination and mass education about the importance of the forest through radio. DZJO, the NGOs and small government groups were vocal on the issue of logging. After the flood, however, more people joined the grassroots level.

People (and groups) from all sectors came together on this issue: farmers, fisherfolk, teachers, the Jaycees, even politicians and businessmen some of whom had previously been against the movement. So after the flood, the issue of logging became very popular in the area. There were more workshops and group meetings organized in the community.

The issue was covered by the radio using all the formats mentioned earlier. Open forum-type discussions conducted live were especially educational. Information was not only exchanged, but it was analyzed
as well. This was demonstrated during the live discussions between the community leaders and the general manager of the primary logging company. Participants were able to explain and defend their positions regarding this topic.

At that time, there were some disagreements as to whether or not the ban should be full or partial. During the weeks following the flood, it surfaced that the permit application and distribution system had brought about confusion in the community. This confusion, along with the difficulty in patrolling/monitoring the logging led to the general agreement among the citizens that a total logging ban was most appropriate.

Once the issue had been settled in the community, the next step was to go to large scale mass media. Being a member station of the Philippine Federation of Catholic Broadcasters, DZJO was able to link the community of Infanta with larger stations concentrated in the metropolitan areas. The next stage was national television.

By this time, news from the countryside of Infanta was making its way to the center. This made access to national television easier. Once again, networking between broadcasters from all levels of media was required.

Once DZJO had served as a facilitator in getting the invitation to national television, leaders from the community were given their opportunity to speak. Initially, television producers thought that the rural people wouldn't be able to "perform" well on television. However, they were soon surprised at how knowledgeable and well-spoken the people were. The local representatives had been trained by their local media experiences. Mass media for these rural people were demystified thus neutralizing their fear. Particularly important was the people's experience with DZJO because it had taught them the basics about mass media and facilitated the provision of expert advice on statistics and laws which helped support their case.
CONCLUSION

The situation we face in terms of the environment is urgent. We need to act to save our Earth with all the resources at our disposal. Mass media on the local, regional, and national levels must become active in the "Green Movement". Local media has to be community-based since this is the only way to help empower people in the proper community-based resource management of our Earth's resources. After all, it is not NGOs, government organizations, nor radio stations which will give us back a green, healthy Earth; it is people in communities.

The case in Infanta concerning the implementation of the logging ban showed how powerful and resourceful community can be despite the odds against them. Tenacity to hold on to hope in their strength and faith in their convictions is a necessary ingredient of success.

The community's access to media can truly make the difference, as the case revealed.

Media is power; participation in media is participation in power; this is people's empowerment in media; an empowerment most helpful in the community's conservation and protection of the valued environment.