



1. DEFINING COMMUNITY BROADCASTING

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AT A GLANCE

- ~ Providing for a clear definition of community broadcasting is the **first step in the creation of a regulatory system** that can promote a robust and healthy sector.
- ~ Community broadcasters are generally characterised by **three principles**:
 - ~ **Independence**: Not-for-profit in nature and independent of government and commercial forces.
 - ~ **Governance**: Owned and/or managed by the community, who participate in policy, programming and operations.
 - ~ **Service**: They focus on issues of local concern and represent the interests of all in the community.
- ~ Being not-for-profit does not preclude community broadcasters from obtaining **public and private sources of funding**, including advertising.
- ~ An important step is to **define ‘community’** which can be a geographic community and/or a community of interest.
- ~ In some countries, **specific programming requirements** are imposed on community broadcasters, for example in terms of languages used and quotas for local content.

INTRODUCTION

Community broadcasters can be generally defined as those which are **independent, not-for-profit, and governed by and in the service of the communities they serve**. They form an important “third pillar” of media, alongside commercial and public broadcasters, and are a crucial part of a healthy, pluralistic media sector.

The starting point for creating and running a regulatory system which facilitates the establishment and functioning of a robust community broadcasting sector is to have a **clear understanding of what is covered by the term ‘community broadcaster’**. Clear definitions are particularly important in relation to community broadcasting given that good practice is to allocate certain benefits, often including funding, to such broadcasters. The absence of clear definitions and understandings can, as a result, lead to attempts by certain actors to try to obscure the core meaning of the concept of community broadcasting so that they can also have access to these benefits.

To this end, this policy brief sets out the main considerations and issues to be taken into account when defining the core characteristics of “community broadcasting”. This feeds into the second policy brief, which builds on this to outline the main options in terms of giving specific legal recognition to community broadcasting. Like the other policy briefs in this series, it is based on international standards, outlined below, and better national practice from around the world.

In order to define community broadcasting it is necessary to start with an understanding of the general objectives which a recognition of this sector is intended to deliver. In other words, the **definition should be designed to ensure that the sector which evolves from it will serve the goals for which it is being recognised**. Rural, grassroots groups are often excluded from wider social, political and economic trends and benefits in society, as along with women, young people and minority groups. Combating this unfortunate tendency is a key driver for the slogan behind the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that “no one will be left behind”.



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It is widely recognised that **having access to relevant information**, along with the means to voice one's needs and concerns, linked with real opportunities to participate in relevant decision-making processes, is key to ensuring that no one gets left behind. This is recognised in *SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*, and especially in *SDG16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements*.



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In any democratic society there are a number of tools for promoting access to information and voice opportunities, including public service and commercial broadcasting. These larger, more mainstream types of broadcasting, however, can **overlook or underrepresent precisely those rural, grassroots and/or minority groups** which are currently being left behind, in the sense that they are marginalised and lack access to basic services like quality education, health facilities, clean water, electricity, economic opportunities and a range of other needs.

In countries around the world, **community broadcasting has emerged to help fill this major communications gap, and to enable these groups to access basic information** that can help them to improve their situations, and to articulate their concerns and attract the attention they need to address them. Commu-

nity broadcasters have in many cases become a vital means by which the voiceless are able to exercise their right to express themselves freely and to access the information they need to bring about positive change.

This, then, forms the heart of any definition of community broadcasting, namely **broadcasters which are distinguished from public service and commercial broadcasters inasmuch as they are specifically tailored in their design and function to serve the voice and information needs of rural, grassroots and/or minority groups**. Community broadcasters can be seen as part of a wider concept of community media which also includes community newspapers and community online facilities.

KEY POLICY ISSUES

There is no universally approved definition of community broadcasting, in part due to the huge range of different 'on-the-ground' situations around the world. But a fundamental characteristic is the **participation of the group that it aims to serve in its operations**, such as programme identification and production, management and financing. It is essential to start by understanding what sorts of groups qualify as communities for purposes of community broadcasting. A second, closely related issue is the **extent to which the community must be involved** for a broadcaster to qualify as a community broadcaster.

In most cases, community broadcasters are understood as **privately owned radio and television stations**, as opposed to the public media (which may also have local outlets, especially radios). Indeed, **independence from government but also from political control** more generally is a hallmark of community broadcasting. At the same time, despite its private ownership structure, **in most cases community broadcasters are required to be non-profit in nature**. Generating revenues is a means of supporting the broadcasting service as opposed to generating profits, which happens with commercial broadcasting. These are the two key characteristics which distinguish community broadcasting from, on the one hand, public broadcasting and, on the other, commercial broadcasting.

It is also inherent in the idea of community broadcasting that it **serves the community**. This has important definitional implications in terms of the type of programming that it carries. This must, where relevant, be produced in a language or languages commonly used, spoken or understood by the community. But the very idea behind community broadcast-



ing also suggests that it **must cover issues of immediate and special relevance to the community**, whether of a social, cultural, political, economic or other nature.

1. What is a community?

In practice, countries have identified two main types of communities which broadcasters might serve to qualify as community broadcasters, namely **geographic communities** – in the sense of people living together in the same geographic area – and **communities of interest** – in the sense of people who share a particular interest, which might be linguistic, cultural, social or other in nature. Countries often start by recognising geographic communities with a view to moving on in due course to recognise communities of interest. The latter are more difficult to reach, at least via traditional broadcast distribution platforms, because they are, almost by definition, geographically dispersed.

Just because people are living in the same area does not necessarily mean that they have a sufficient level of shared characteristics to come together to create a community broadcaster. Shared characteristics are, however, **likely to be present in rural geographic communities, particularly in less developed countries**, where those living together rurally often share close language, social, cultural and even economic ties. For this reason, and also because pressure on broadcasting frequencies is much higher in urban areas, in some countries the focus has been on rural, geographic communities.



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2. Independence

As noted above, it is essential for community broadcasters to be **independent of both governments and private individuals**. This is basic to the goal of serving the community and vital for credibility among the diverse sections of the community. Independence is often achieved by prohibiting public or political ownership of these entities, and by **requiring them to be non-profit in nature**. In some countries, religious groups are also prohibited from owning community broadcasters, on the basis that they may not serve the interests of the whole

community. Note that community broadcasters should be free to seek both **private and public sources of funding and support**, including advertising, in so far as this does not compromise their independence (see *Briefs 5 and 6*).

3. Governance by the community

Just because a broadcaster is non-profit and located in and serves a particular community does not necessarily mean that it is a community broadcaster. Many commercial and public service broadcasters serve particular geographic communities while some also serve communities of interest. Generally speaking, **a necessary precondition to qualifying as a community broadcaster is to involve governance and/or ownership by the community**. The community should be involved in all areas of operations, including management, policy, programming, and other operations.

In different countries, a number of specific conditions regarding links to the community have been imposed. In some cases, there are **formal structural requirements**, for example that the broadcaster hold an open meeting annually with the community or that it have a governing board made up primarily of members of the community. In other cases, requirements relate to programming, for example that a minimum percentage of programmes are produced by members of the community, or to operations, for example regarding community members working or volunteering at the station. **It is important that any such requirements are clear and realistic.**

An appropriate balance needs to be struck here between imposing unduly strong requirements of a community link and recognising that it can take some time, and a track record



of service, for strong links to emerge. This can be a bit of a chicken and egg conundrum, since it can be difficult to engage a community before showing the community the benefits of community broadcasting, but a broadcaster may not be recognised as a community broadcaster if the community is not sufficiently engaged.

4. Service to the community

At the end of the day, it is the programming that is carried by community broadcasters that really serves the overarching goals for which this form of broadcasting has been recognised, and in some countries specific conditions are placed on programming by community broadcasters. **Operating in the language(s) which is spoken and understood** in the relevant community is obviously a key consideration here. In general, community broadcasters should operate in the public interest and serve the voice and information needs of the community, and achieving this is closely related to the question of links to the community. Some important genres of information which community broadcasters should normally seek to disseminate include **local news and current affairs content, educational programmes, promotion of the accountability of local government and private sector actors, information about local economic issues** (such as where to obtain the best price for local products), and **information about social developments** (potentially including births, marriages and deaths). It is essential that programming is sensitive to **gender and youth issues** in the community, and that it seeks to ensure appropriate service to such diverse sections. It can be useful for community broadcasters to come together to syndicate relevant content among themselves, but minimum quotas for locally-produced content can help ensure that this (relatively more accessible) form of content does not unduly dominate.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

A number of statements relating to the definition of community broadcasting can be found in different international instruments. An early statement on this issue is found in the *African Charter on Broadcasting 2001*, adopted at the UNESCO-sponsored Windhoek Conference to celebrate World Press Freedom Day on the tenth anniversary of the original Windhoek Conference, which defines community broadcasting as follows:

Community broadcasting is broadcasting which is for, by and about the community, whose ownership and management is representative of the community, which pursues a social development agenda, and which is non-profit.

A more detailed definition, albeit still very open-ended in nature, is provided in the *2009 Declaration of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe* on the role of community media in promoting social cohesion and intercultural dialogue, the preamble of which states:

Noting that community media, taking the form of broadcasting and/or other electronic media projects, as well as print format, may share to a greater or lesser extent some of the following characteristics: independence from government, commercial and religious institutions and political parties; a not-for-profit nature; voluntary participation of members of civil society in the devising and management of programmes; activities aiming at social gain and community benefit; ownership by and accountability to the communities of place and/or of interest which they serve; commitment to inclusive and intercultural practices; ...

In a similar fashion, the Recommendations by Participants of the *International Seminar on Community Media Sustainability: Strengthening Policies and Funding*, a UNESCO-sponsored event, call on governments and regulators to recognise community broadcasting as clearly distinguished “from commercial and public service broadcasters based on its non-profit nature, its strong links with and its capacity to provide a service to the community”.

The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) is an international non-governmental organisation serving the community radio movement which is the leading community media organisation globally. In 2008, AMARC adopted its Principles for a Democratic Legislation on Community Broadcasting (AMARC Principles) which define community broadcasting quite specifically:

Principle 3: Definition and characteristics



Community radio and television are private entities with public objectives. They are managed by various types of non-profit social organizations. Their fundamental characteristic is the participation of the community, in ownership as well as programming, management, operation, financing and evaluation. They are independent and non-governmental media that do not depend on or are part of political parties or private firms.

Principle 4: Objectives and ends

Community media exist to satisfy the communication needs of their communities' members and to enable them to exercise their rights of access to information and freedom of expression. Their aims are directly related to the communities they serve and represent including: the promotion of social development, human rights, cultural diversity, pluralism of information and opinion, peaceful coexistence, and the strengthening of social and cultural identities, among others. They are pluralist media and for that reason must ensure the access, dialogue and participation of a range of social movements, races, ethnic groups, genders, sexual orientations, religions, ages and others.

Good practice in developing a policy for community broadcasting is to start by engaging in consultative discussions with stakeholders about how these standards may best be applied in the local context.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ideally, the notion of a community should be understood broadly to include both **geographic communities and communities of interest** but, as a practical matter, and in the early phases of recognition, States may wish to limit the scope to geographic communities and even where relevant to rural geographic communities.
2. Only broadcasters which can demonstrate **ownership or governance by the community they serve** should be recognised as community broadcasters. Specific conditions may be imposed to achieve this but any such conditions should be **concrete and realistic in terms of achievability**. At the same time, in recognition of the initial challenges this can pose, a **relatively more flexible approach** should be considered in the early days of establishing a particular community broadcaster.
3. To safeguard the independence of community broadcasters from the government and other political forces, **public and political ownership of these entities should be prohibited**. They should also be required to operate on a **non-profit basis** to protect them against undue commercial influence.
4. Consideration should be given to supplementing the general requirement of community participation with **specific programming requirements** for community broadcasters, which may refer to languages, programme genres and/or the local content production. Any such requirements should be relevant to the purposes and goals of community broadcasting, and should not be unduly vague or onerous.

POLICY CHECKLIST

- Specifies clearly which communities are to be served (geographic, interest)
- Outlines criteria for community participation in governance and operations
- Specifies how independence should be ensured
- Takes into account programming, including languages used and requirements for local and community-relevant content, including relating to women, youth and other relatively-marginalised groups

