

**Liberia Community Radio Case Study:  
*The Sustainability Myth*  
(February 2009)**

**Background**

In 2007, there were 57 registered community radio stations, 37 of which were active, in post-conflict Liberia.<sup>1</sup> Their recent and rapid emergence can be attributed to the change in political climate that resulted from the peaceful election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2005, the larger trend towards decentralized media in Africa, and public demand for localized news, information and entertainment. However, despite the proliferation of community radio stations in Liberia, their potential to create participatory democracy, and their focus on community development, community radio has not been utilized fully as a partner in the development process. The self-limiting definition of media that focuses on traditional press and urban-based radio stations providing news is one contributing factor, while another is the myth that community radio is not sustainable.

Community radio stations face several obstacles that threaten both their operations and engagement in democratic development. Of the 47 community stations outside of Monrovia, less than 35 are presently on-air and broadcasting.<sup>2</sup> Although some stations receive electricity in-kind from telecom companies, many more struggle with irregular power supplies and the rising cost of fuel for generators. Still, technology is not the primary concern. More pressing are issues of organizational and financial fragility, resulting from inadequate community management and training in business management, fundraising, budgeting and strategic planning. These weaknesses make community radios in Liberia vulnerable to social, economic and political challenges, and dissuade potential partners from making investments.

However, there are models of successful community radios in Liberia, and upon closer inspection there is evidence of long-term planning, accountability mechanisms and innovative management strategies. There are programs aimed at attracting community revenue and local advertisers, station managers who have identified alternative resources for capacity building, and national networks created for advocacy. By further exploring exactly how these community radios are sustaining themselves, appropriate interventions aimed at increasing community radio's stability can be identified and their growth incorporated into the development agenda.

**Goals and Objectives**

The goal of the case study was to explore how community radios are sustaining themselves, while its specific objectives were to (1) identify strategies and innovations unique to community radio that enhance and strengthen sustainability, and (2) establish the community's role in sustaining community radio. Key research questions that guided this exploration included:

- What are community radio operating costs and how are these costs met?
- What are the main sources of revenue and what financial systems and accountability mechanisms are in place to effectively capture revenue?
- How does station programming reflect the needs of the community?
- How does the community actively participate in the management of the station?
- How is the relationship between the station and community mutually beneficial?

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<sup>1-2</sup>International Media Support. (2007). *Strengthening Liberia's media: A review of media support in the post-conflict transitional period and recommendations for future actions*. (Report). Denmark: IMS.

## **Methodology**

The primary research tool was an informal interview protocol with guided questions developed in consultation with Search for Common Ground's Sierra Leone office. Community radio managers in the towns of Voinjama, Senji, Gbarnga, Ganta and Buchanan were the primary interviewees as they were in the best position to answer questions regarding the community radios' operations. These specific locations were chosen due to their geographic diversity and the varying levels of success in regard to community radio sustainability, as well as their existing relationship with SFCG. Additional radio staff, board members and key stakeholders in community radio governance were interviewed to provide supplementary information when needed.

## **Key Findings**

### **A. Operations**

#### ***Station set-up***

The total operating costs for the stations included in the study ran between U.S. \$500-\$800 per month. The main operating cost for Radio Cape Mount in Senji, which was on the lower level of the scale, was fuel and other costs related to running and maintaining the generator. Although its staff worked on a voluntary basis, and the only payment formally accounted for was a U.S. \$10 Christmas gift, the station staff raised income selling cold water, which covered the station manager's monthly stipend. The largest portion of the monthly budget of Radio Gbezon in Buchanan also went to fuel, although Cellcom provided the station's electricity for fifty-percent of the time it was on-air. Radio Gbarnga in Gbarnga and Radio Kerghemah in Nimba, which had the highest budgets for operations, also benefited from Cellcom electricity, but on a full-time basis, and their greatest operating cost was staff stipends. Although staff stipends exceeded U.S. \$500 per month at each of these stations, they were able to bring in sufficient revenue from the community to cover staff costs. Until Kintoma Radio in Voinjama went off-air due to a lightning strike which destroyed the station's transmitter, it also benefited from Cellcom electricity, and staff stipends made up the largest part of its operating costs.

With these minimal budgets, the stations interviewed managed to cover most of their respective counties and parts of neighboring counties, and broadcast seven days a week. Although the majority of revenue was generated from the primary towns where the stations were located, some stations such as Radio Kerghemah and Radio Cape Mount received income from bordering counties. Radio Cape Mount also reached parts of Sierra Leone, while Kintoma Radio and Radio Kerghemah transmitted into Guinea. Radio Kerghemah even generated revenue from these international listeners due to its special language programming in French and Mano. The number of hours the stations broadcasted varied more dramatically. When Kintoma Radio was on-air, it broadcasted only six hours a day, while Radio Gbarnga broadcasted thirteen hours, Radio Cape Mount fifteen hours, Radio Kerghemah eighteen hours, and Radio Gbezon twenty hours a day.

The stations had personnel ranging from twelve to fifteen staff members, with the exception of Radio Kerghemah, which had a sizeable staff of twenty-seven. The majority of Radio Kerghemah staff were local language announcers (eight) and English producers/announcers (fourteen). However, most of the other stations' staff members were performing multiple roles as reporters, producers and announcers. The stations' management committees consisted of four to five staff members, and station manager, program director, sales director and news director were the most common management positions. There were generally two staff meetings per month, one with the management team regarding the station's operations and one with general staff to discuss production. The most commonly cited staffing need was training in financial management as many sales agents and accountants lacked sufficient skills and experience.

All of the stations were utilizing studio equipment and transmitters donated by international NGOs, but they were maintaining the equipment with their own funds. The stations had also made their own equipment purchases and had plans to obtain additional equipment. Radio Kerghemah intended to buy spare parts for repairs and a portable broadcast transmitter after it completed the expansion of its compound, which it

planned to finance through a week-long fundraising program. The station already had U.S. \$5,000 in the bank for this purpose. Radio Gbarnga successfully raised funds for a motorcycle, computer and wireless internet connection, and had submitted proposals to different NGOs for a bigger transmitter. Radio Gbezon also submitted a proposal to an NGO for a larger transmitter, while it continued fundraising within the community for a mixing board and computer. Radio Cape Mount planned to purchase its own production studio through a 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary fundraiser and networking with Liberians in the United States.

### ***Financial systems***

With the exception of Kintoma Radio, all of the stations had bank accounts and mechanisms in place to guard against corruption and promote transparency and accountability. The board chair, station manager and policy advisor of Radio Cape Mount served as the station's signatories, and a trusted elder from the community was selected by the station's community radio board to hold the money until it could be deposited into the station's bank account in Monrovia. The elder even kept a record book which required two of the signatories to make a "deposit" or "withdrawal". At Radio Gbarnga, the station manager, business manager and news director served as signatories with the provision that any two could make withdrawals with the approval of all three. At Radio Gbezon, the board chair's approval was needed for all account withdrawals, which could be made by either the station manager or sales director. Radio Kerghemah was the only station with four signatories, two from the board and two from the management team, and its policy was that any three must sign to make a withdrawal.

Most of the stations used vouchers and receipts to track income and expenses, while there were a variety of strategies employed to capture the revenue coming in from the community. At Radio Gbezon, the sales agent received the money for community announcements and requests, which was entered into a daily income log, and only then could the sales director, who was not allowed to receive money, hand the announcements or requests over to the station's announcers. At Radio Gbarnga, every morning the station manager listened to the recordings of the previous day's announcements and requests and checked them against the vouchers in the sales book. Another simple method of capturing revenue that Radio Cape Mount utilized was to log money received for announcements or requests in an accounting book, as well as on a bulletin board in the reception area of the station, so that the entire station staff was aware of what should be aired.

### ***Income generation***

Kintoma Radio noted the difficulties in raising funds while the radio station was off-air and said that the station had not received more than U.S. \$25 in a day through any of its fundraising efforts, which included an open letter to the community and door-to-door solicitations. However, the station had been successful in forging partnerships with the local authorities and community organizations to aid in the construction of the new station. To date, the station had received in-kind donations in the form of free labor from a youth organization, and timber and sand from various communities. The station had also reached an agreement with SFCG to assist with some of the costs incurred during construction and to provide the new facility with a transmitter and studio equipment. Kintoma Radio, like the other stations, had not yet received any money from the county development fund, but was instructed to submit a request.

All the stations reported a spike in income generation during the holiday seasons. Radio Kerghemah maximized on seasonal fluctuations by introducing a program that encouraged people to make requests for gifts via the radio during religious and independence days. While announcements, requests and dedications were important sources of community-derived revenue, most stations also utilized 'Taking the Radio to the Community' programs where they visited different communities, recorded their voices and solicited donations. Another fundraising method employed was fundraising concerts and events. Radio Gbezon, in particular, had success with its annual Gospel Music Concert and Back to School Jam. Still, around seventy-five percent of Radio Gbezon's total revenue came from advertisements and commercials for local businesses. All other stations received minimal revenue from local businesses, although Radio Kerghemah generated significant revenue from Comium advertisements and was in discussions with LoneStar.

## ***Affiliations***

All of the stations were members of the Association of Liberia Community Radio (ALICOR), although there was some disagreement as to the benefits of this affiliation. Radio Cape Mount said that it had not seen any tangible benefits, such as training or technical assistance. While the station manager of Radio Gbarnga, who also served as ALICOR President, admitted the organization had not yet realized its full potential, he said the organization was important in championing the cause of community radio. He gave an example of grant money issued by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa for community radios in Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone and Liberia never reaching community radios in Liberia. He said that community radios needed ALICOR to advocate for accountability in similar circumstances in the future so that community radios can benefit from the money designated for its development instead of people and organizations far from the communities. Radio Gbezon also thought the professional support ALICOR offered had real value and Radio Kerghemah, which was also a member of Nimba Community Radio (comprised of eleven local stations), said that the organization's advocacy efforts were already proving beneficial as community radio's voice in Liberia had grown with the stations' solidarity. While two of the radio station managers interviewed held leadership positions within ALICOR, all of the stations said that they were contributing to ALICOR by sharing information and paying annual dues. The stations also had affiliations with the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), although their involvement with PUL was much more limited and the only benefit cited was personal connections.

## **B. Programming**

### ***Local***

While on average, around seventy-five percent of the programs aired by the stations were locally produced and focused on community news, agriculture, health and education, only thirty percent of Radio Gbezon's program schedule represented community programs, largely due to the large amount of time allotted to Western music. However, the station did have locally produced programs specific to women and children and aired its news programs in nine local vernaculars. Only Radio Gbarnga had no programs for women or children (although the station had submitted a proposal to Save the Children), while Kintoma Radio, when still on-air, had the only female reporter who produced a Women Today program. As for participatory programming, all of the stations hosted various call-in programs, roundtable discussions and interviews with community members to mainstream listeners' voices. Radio Gbezon also had a popular program called Community Histories, which told the histories of various communities through interviews with elders. However, with the exception of Radio Gbarnga, which held community meetings and conducted listener surveys, the target communities were not involved in creating the program schedule, as the other stations had no formal mechanisms in place to capture audience ratings and relied on listeners calling the station with feedback.

### ***National and International***

The majority of stations had agreements with Talking Drum Studio and UNMIL to broadcast their regular national programs, while Kintoma Radio had an additional agreement with the national private radio company, Star Radio. Most of the stations also had agreements with BBC to air its 'Focus on Africa' programs, although this agreement was not attached to any monetary compensation. Radio Gbarnga and Radio Kerghemah had similar agreements with West Africa Democracy Radio to air the ongoing Charles Taylor trial.

## **C. Ownership and Governance**

### ***Management structure***

Each of the stations was managed by a community radio board of well-respected community leaders selected by the community on the basis of their trustworthiness and community involvement. The community radio boards were responsible for the stations' policies and making major decisions. The community radio boards met either monthly or quarterly, although Radio Cape Mount said that the board often failed to attend meetings and participate, as they were also involved in various other community activities that demanded their time. As a result, the station was forced to travel to the various districts where its members resided to report on its operations. The board members for Radio Gbezon assisted with fundraising, and while the

board for Radio Kerghemah did not fundraise, they assisted in the negotiation of additional space for the station's planned expansion. Radio Gbarnga and Kintoma Radio reported that only the board chairs were fully participating in the oversight of the radio station. As a result, Kintoma Radio planned on restructuring its board upon completion of its new facility.

### ***Community ownership***

One of the main characteristics that sets community radio apart from mainstream media is that the community has the opportunity to initiate communication and participate in program making, management and ownership of the station. This means that mechanisms should be in place that allow the community to take part in the station's operations so that they have a sense of ownership and feel that the station is 'our' station. The stations had achieved varying degrees of success in involving the target communities in the ownership and governance of the community radios. Kintoma Radio had held four community meetings to garner support and gather feedback on citizens' expectations for its new station, while Radio Gbezon had held two meetings during its capital campaigns. Radio Gbarnga also aired its community meetings on the radio and invited listeners who could not attend the meetings to call in and share their ideas and critiques, while Radio Cape Mount and Radio Kerghemah relied solely on radio broadcasts to communicate with the community. Radio Cape Mount submitted a financial and narrative report every Monday to the board which was also read over the radio, and Radio Kerghemah aired its annual report to the board on the radio for community members to call in and comment on.

In every case, the station manager said it was the community that owned the station, but the ownership of the property on which the stations were located varied. As for physical ownership of the stations, it was the local authority who owned the property on which Kintoma Radio and Radio Gbezon were located, while Radio Cape Mount had a special proclamation signed by the local authority so that the whole of Grand Cape Mount County owned the station and property where it was located. Telecom owned the property on which Radio Gbarnga was located, but the station was allowed free use of the space through the county authority. Radio Kerghemah leased its space from Cellcom, and was currently trying to negotiate its purchase.

### ***Benefits***

While all of the stations said that they provided their respective communities with information, education and entertainment, they stressed that their primary role was to disseminate educational and developmental information. They aired important local issues and gave community members the opportunity to call-in and express their ideas and opinions about their community's development. More specific benefits were also cited. Kintoma Radio reported that it had helped to transform the lives of its citizens as it encouraged ex-combatants in the DDRR process to come on the radio and publicly renounce their war names and former way of life. Radio Kerghemah said that it helped to mobilize citizens and promoted community events free of charge. Radio Cape Mount boasted of successfully reuniting over twenty missing persons with their families, while Radio Gbarnga promoted security through its community watch program. Radio Gbarnga was quick to point out that the benefits were mutual. Because the station served the interests of the community, people assumed responsibilities in keeping the station operating. As a result, the station greatly benefited from the community's assistance in the radio's upkeep and maintenance.

### **Conclusions**

While the community radio case study revealed that individual stations were functioning at different capacities, all had achieved some level of sustainability by employing diverse and innovative management strategies. Some of the most effective strategies focused on building community ownership, and ranged from consultation on the program schedule to participation in the stations' operations. Radio Gbezon was the only station with a program schedule that consisted mostly of national and international programming. It was also the only station to have a majority of its total income derive from commercials and advertising. In contrast, Radio Gbarnga, which was a model for community involvement, operated almost entirely on revenue from the community and also benefited from in-kind support and assistance. This seems to suggest that stations which are attuned to their communities' needs are more likely to benefit from their respective

communities' support. Thus, community involvement and ownership translates to community radio sustainability.

Beyond individual community members, community radios need local authorities to support their operations. If community radios were to receive support from the county development funds, they would be more likely to focus on development programming that benefits the community rather than programming that attracts commercial advertisers. Local authorities need to be educated on how supporting community radio assists development and growth, as government aid could go a long way in stabilizing the sector and increasing community radio stations' sustainability. The study revealed that ALICOR might be an effective tool in advocating for this support as it presents a unified voice among community radios. However, there were differing opinions in regard to whether or not ALICOR had the capacity to carry out such a campaign.

Finally, the study suggested that there are already models of sustainability that currently exist within the sector which can be easily replicated. While none of the stations in the case study had succeeded in all aspects of operations, there were successful practices to be gleaned from each of the community radios. For example, Kintoma Radio could create a financial system based on Radio Cape Mount's. Both stations face similar challenges in regard to access to banking facilities and staff accounting skills, yet Radio Cape Mount has managed to put a system into place that works for the station and guards against corruption. Another example was Radio Kerghemah, which maximized on its proximity to Guinea by developing programming specifically for its international listeners, which then allowed it to fundraise across the border. Radio Cape Mount and Kintoma Radio could employ similar strategies and increase their fundraising base. ALICOR might be a useful vehicle in promoting these models of sustainability, as the study revealed the organization is an important source of information for its membership.

Recommendations based on the conclusions drawn from this case study are outlined below. However, a similar, yet more exhaustive assessment of Liberian community radios is recommended to formulate a standardized set of guidelines for the design of an appropriate strategy to support the development of the sector.

### ***Recommendations***

#### **▪ Increasing community involvement**

Community radios need help in implementing community outreach activities, such as dramas, skits and town hall meetings, aimed at educating the community about the benefits of community radio and their role in supporting and managing it. The stations themselves also need education on the importance of conducting listener surveys and holding meetings to provide listeners with a forum for feedback and discussion. Finally, community radios need assistance in drafting terms of reference and providing board development to community board members.

#### **▪ Strengthening of ALICOR Network**

ALICOR needs additional resources and training to provide technical assistance to its member stations in the form of staff development and advocacy work. It also needs professional guidance on how to coordinate a movement within the system of community radios to lobby for an allotment of the County Development Fund for community radios as they provide important development programming. Most importantly, ALICOR needs assistance gathering and disseminating information among its membership, especially in regard to opportunities for community radios.

#### **▪ Promoting models of sustainable practices**

Individual needs assessments need to be conducted with community radios to identify stations' individual challenges. They then need to be provided with alternative systems based on the practices of other community radios within the Liberia network. A Liberia-specific community radio handbook that provides real-world examples of successful strategies for income generation, financial management, community involvement and strategic planning could complement hands-on assistance.