EMPOWERMENT THROUGH COMMUNICATION
THE CASE OF COMMUNITY RADIOS IN ECUADOR

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In the province of Manabi, Ecuador, the Poverty Reduction and Local Rural Development Project (PROLOCAL) has partnered with a group of community based organizations to harness a community radio’s potential to contribute to local development. The goals of the Radio Alfaro Initiative are:

- Facilitating dialogue on local development needs and renewing the sense of community identity
- Strengthening local Community Based Organizations (CBO’s) capacities to provide services and mobilize constituencies for change.
- Supporting Radio Alfaro’s operational capabilities in order to promote the station’s sustainability and further involvement in local development initiatives.

Context

PROLOCAL works in six rural micro regions across Ecuador with the objective of ensuring local empowerment, thereby improving the quality of local services and increasing access to productive assets. Manabi is one these micro regions which together covers close to 8% of the national territory. The micro regions were defined according to geopolitical boundaries but reflecting groupings with strong economic, cultural and social links.

Radio Alfaro is a community radio station based in the town of Jipijapa, and serves several municipalities in the south of Manabi. The initiative is led by the Union Provincial de Organizaciones Campesinas de Manabi (UPOCAM), an association of rural cooperatives, which is an active provider of health and educational services in the region.

The radio station has a small production cabin where it records programs. Due to the lack of resources to purchase transmission equipment these programs are broadcast through a number of different outlets.

Communications Approach

Like other regions participating in the project, Manabi suffers from poor integration to local and regional markets, lack of access to credit, and deficient provision of basic services. PROLOCAL’s communication strategy seeks to stimulate project staff, government agencies, and communities to discuss, reflect, and act on these and other pressing local development issues. It is expected that the communication strategy will aid these stakeholders to better cooperate with each other and to strengthen their participation in the project, notably components aimed at:

1. Training of local service providers to better serve the needs of rural people;
2. Financing of local subprojects in order to improve productive capacity and access to public services;
3. Supporting the formulation of local development plans.

The communication strategy focuses on two main components:

1. An institutional communication component that strives to build a supportive political environment for PROLOCAL,
by stimulating dialogues on development among local and national stakeholders, while clarifying the project role among agencies working on related issues;

2. A participatory communication component that seeks to empower communities to form collective identities, articulate their needs, participate in the implementation of local development schemes and provide feedback to the project’s implementation units at the local and national level.

The second component focuses its efforts on creating, training, and supporting networks of local communicators. These are individuals chosen by community groups whose role is to stimulate discussion on local development challenges, facilitate follow through actions based on information regarding project activities, and support community members in providing feedback to the project coordination unit.

Areas of partnership with Radio Alfaro

Facilitating dialogue on local development needs and renewing the sense of community identity

The Radio Alfaro Initiative in Jipijapa is central to the projects’ efforts of training the communicators’ network of Manabi. The station’s “production cabin” serves as a learning center where research, reporting, and production skills are taught through a training program funded by PROLOCAL. The local communicators are also beginning to fulfill their duties by producing radio programs.

To execute the training program, the project partnered with UPOCAM and the Union de Organizaciones Campesinas de Santa Ana, a second tier organization whose membership consists of several local CBO’s. The partners were in charge of recruiting 25 volunteers and ensuring participation from different hamlets in the area. The training consisted of a series of workshops which were delivered by a local consultant hired by PROLOCAL. As part of the training program, the participants were required to produce a weekly radio bulletin, the Radio Revista, which voices community members’ perspectives on local issues of interest including cultural, environmental, and health concerns. These programs are currently aired from a radio station that broadcasts from the provincial capital.

In addition, the Radio Revistas are used by local schools, which are commonly lacking textbooks, as material for learning and discussion. The participants mentioned that by producing this program they began to discover their community’s history and to discuss public health issues that were stigmatized by older generations.

Strengthening CBO’s Capacities to provide services and mobilize constituencies for change.

The project plans to complete its ongoing series of capacity building activities for CBO’s with a workshop on strategic communication that would:

- Enable CBO’s to identify how to best use the radio and how it can compliment existing services and respond to members’ needs;
- Assist CBO members in building necessary communication skills to carry out identified objectives

Some local CBO’s are already identifying ways to harness the radio’s potential. During a field visit, UPOCAM’s leaders explained that they regard the radio as a means through which their organization could better deliver services and strengthen its role as a social and political actor. The following roles for the radio station were identified:

- Complement UPOCAMP’s current educational programs on agricultural production, health, and secondary schools;
- Build a sense of identity by rescuing cultural traditions;
Mentor local youth in values and life skills;

− Provide the Parroquias with an opportunity to communicate and voice their needs;

− Strengthen links between UPOCAM, its constituency, and other organizations;

− Hold local authorities accountable through media pressure and information disclosure;

− Build capacity to reflect on the country’s economic and political realities.

Implementation of the proposed training on strategic communication for CBO’s has been challenging. The Manabi project coordination unit did not initially receive sufficient guidance on how to integrate communication skills into its overall efforts to build CBO’s capacities. This occurred partly because of the project has only one communication specialist based in its Quito headquarters, who is responsible for communication activities in the capital as well as in the six micro regions. It has also been challenging to delegate responsibilities in the implementation of this training because communication does not fall squarely under one of the project’s lines of work, rather it is a cross-cutting element.

Supporting Radio Alfaro’s Operational Capabilities

Through its training programs, PROLOCAL also seeks to support participants of the Radio Alfaro Initiative in developing the skills and strategies that are critical to the station’s sustainability and its operational capabilities. PROLOCAL’s staff along with a mentor financed by a bi-later agency also assist participants in developing the following:

Programming

The communicators network’s training program enables participants to develop skills that are critical for the production of local radio programs. Participants mentioned that by producing the Radio Revista they have gained confidence in public speaking and researching local issues.

Enabling Policies and Politics

Ecuador’s telecommunications legislation recognizes community radios as legal entities. This makes it possible for Radio Alfaro to obtain a broadcasting license and enter in contracts with advertisers and donors, who might be dissuaded from doing business with an informal radio station that has no legal responsibilities.

In several Latin American countries policies that prevent the legalization of community radio stations, has a negative impact on these stations’ operational capabilities. Opposition from local political or social actors have also harmed the stations. Fortunately Radio Alfaro has been spared from such obstacles.

Assessment

Under the mentorship of a Bolivian community radio specialist, the communicators networks conducted a market study which determined the audiences’ programming preferences. The training program has strengthened the volunteers’ capacities to assess the audience’s priorities and needs.

Planning and Organization

Radio Alfaro will have to choose whether it remains attached to UPOCAM or if it becomes a separate entity governed by representatives of different organizations, including, but not limited to UPOCAM. Some members of the initiative have developed skills in organizational planning through previous work with CBO’s. However, assistance will be required to identify and implement an institutional structure that stimulates ownership by different groups and ensures that the station remains accountable to its community.

Fundraising and Marketing

So far, the station’s volunteers have not been involved in fundraising activities, yet. Their mentor has experience in conducting fundraising from sources that are internal and external to the community. In the long run, the volunteers’ involvement in a fundraising strategy and their development of marketing skills will be vital for the station’s economic sustainability.

Mobilization

At the onset of the project, there was high demand for greater inclusion in the local communicators training, mostly from young people. However, ten of the original participants dropped out, mainly due to economic and family pressures. Like all community radio stations, Radio Alfaro must develop ways to effectively mobilize and motivate community members to participate as it will be competing with a wide range of external pressures.

Looking Forward: Future Challenges for the Partnership

Utilizing Radio Alfaro to share knowledge, vertically and horizontally

The station can facilitate information flow among communities and within the project coordination unit. If Radio Alfaro is outfitted with
internet access, it could transfer relevant information to the communities, from the Ecualocal portal. This website, funded by PROLOCAL, provides its audience with information on project opportunities, methods for sustainable development, and information on initiatives around the country. The radio can also “translate” the content from the web scriptures to language that is understandable and appealing to community members.

**Engaging several CBO’s in using the station to strengthen their operational capabilities**

The workshop on strategic communication for CBO’s could provide these groups with an opportunity to conceive how the radio can strengthen their capabilities. It will also provide PROLOCAL with an opportunity to better gauge the demand for the project’s involvement with this initiative in groups beyond UPOCAM.

**Representing the interests of several community groups (partnerships)**

The radio initiative runs the risk of becoming controlled by UPOCAM, thus excluding other organizations. So far, UPOCAM has devoted the most time and resources to the project and its vision for the station is clearer than that of other organizations.

PROLOCAL could assist UPOCAM and other interested parties in developing an institutional framework which would stimulate different groups to share responsibility for the station. It could also use its resources to stimulate inclusion, but it should be careful not to impose its views upon the CBO’s.

**Continue to develop Radio’s operational capabilities**

Programming is not possible without the adequate technical equipment. Radio Alfaro still lacks transmission equipment, and PROLOCAL intends to assist them in obtaining it. In addition, the planned workshop on strategic communication for CBO’s could be utilized to provide participants training in critical capabilities for managing a radio station, such as fundraising, programming, and assessing the audience’s needs.

PROLOCAL financed three intensive three day communications’ capacity building workshops for the members of radio Alfaro and the local communicators’ network. In addition, the project hired the radio station for the creation of 54 radio revistas, (one per week) for which it provided training, computers and production equipment. The cost for all of these inputs was $10,000.

**Lessons Learned**

- PROLOCAL staff and those behind Radio Alfaro (particularly UPOCAM) envision the station as far more than a tool through which to disseminate information. They see it as a means through which community groups are empowered to voice their views and become engaged in local initiatives that complement the project’s main lines of action. (support for local planning, income generating projects, and service provision)

- In-depth engagement with a diverse group of CBO’s is necessary if a broad sector of the community is going to share and contribute to the vision for the station, which until now has been principally manifested by UPOCAM and PROLOCAL.

- A training in strategic communication for CBO’s could provide other CBO’s in Manabi with an opportunity to better assess how the radio station could serve them. In order for this activity to take place, it is important for the national and regional PCU’s to define how this training fits in the project’s overall capacity building scheme. Support from a communications specialist at the local level could also improve the training’s responsiveness to local CBO’s demands.

- The project has collaborated with the radio station in areas such as organization and planning, which go beyond the production of programs. This flows from PROLOCAL communication objectives that emphasize building the communities’ capacities to discuss local development issues and identify their priorities.

- Issues that lie beyond the station’s or PROLOCAL’s control can affect the radio’s operational capabilities. In this case, social, political and legal conditions have mostly worked out in Radio Alfaro’s favor, and have improved its chances for sustainability.

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