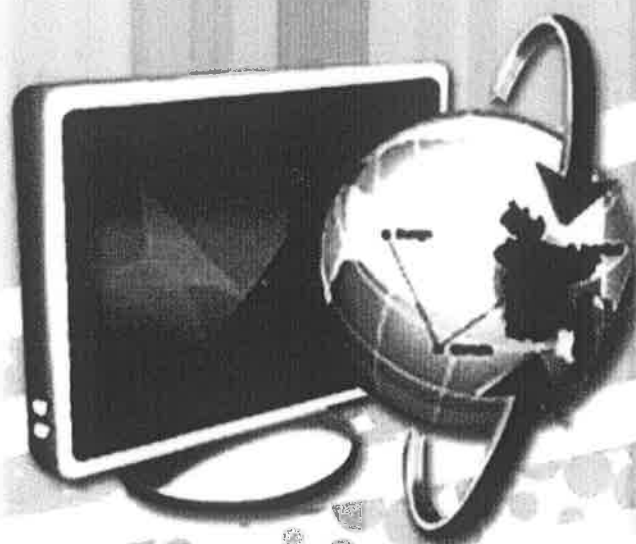


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Power in Empowerment : Role of Community Media in Bringing Governance at Local Level

Pooja O. Murada

Sehgal Foundation, India

poojamurada@smsfoundation.org

Charu Khanna

Sehgal Foundation, India

c.khanna@smsfoundation.org

Abstract

Community development is "a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems." It is closely related to good governance. However, good governance is only possible when the community members are well aware of the problems troubling its members at different levels, and they are ready to opt for a uniform solution to address them. This paper attempts to identify the challenges of good governance in rural regions of India and analyze how the Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can address these challenges to promote good governance, and hence community development. One of the roles of ICTs is to broaden the perspective of communities in policy-related issues and prioritize community actions. It should build capacities of people and create a cadre of active citizens to affect change, besides strengthening institutions and agencies (public, private and non-governmental). ICT also help village-level institutions in creating a dialogue with citizens to shape and determine change in their communities. For doing this, only an appropriate ICT tool should be used – one that suits the requirement of community and does not require too much of technical expertise on the part of community. Otherwise, the community needs to be trained to use it, else it will feel alienated. The paper on "Role of community media in bringing governance at local level" deals with the scope of ICTs, illustrated with the example of Sehgal Foundation's community radio initiative Alfaz-e-Mewat, in bringing good governance at the grassroots-level, and hence taking the villages on the route of development.

Keywords

Community development, empowerment, community radio, ICT.

Introduction

Development is a broad and well-defined term. It has been fragmented into various tangible and non-tangible entities, such as land, infrastructure, science, economic, software, and many more. Community, being a unit of society, is referred to as a group of people residing at a particular geographical area, practicing the same culture. Community Development refers to the practices and academic disciplines designed to improve various aspects of the community. It is an integral part of social development.

The United Nations defines community development as "a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems." The process selected for community development must strengthen civil society by prioritizing the actions of communities, broadening their perspectives of social, economic, and environmental policies. It should build capacities of people and create a cadre of active citizens to affect change, besides strengthening institutions and agencies (public, private and non-governmental) to work together and engage in a dialogue with citizens.

Professionals have developed a number of overlapping approaches to community development. Some focus on the processes while others target outcomes/objectives. They include capacity building of communities by helping them obtain, strengthen, and maintain abilities to set and achieve their own development objectives. One of the widely acknowledged approaches towards community development is good governance. Good governance is an indeterminate term used extensively in international development literature to describe how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources. The concept of "good governance" often emerges as a model to compare ineffective economies or political bodies with viable economies and political bodies. The concept centers the responsibility of governments and governing bodies to meet the needs of masses as opposed to select groups in society. Different comparisons of the analysis of governance in scholastic and practical discussions can cause the meaning of "good governance" to vary greatly from one practitioner to another. According to the United Nations, good governance has eight characteristics. These are :

- Consensus oriented
- Participatory
- Following the "Rule of Law"
- Effective and efficient
- Accountable
- Transparent
- Responsive
- Equitable and inclusive

The paper attempts to identify the challenges for good governance in rural India and analyze how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can promote good governance for community development. The subject will be made comprehensive by showcasing as examples the community radio initiatives of the SM Sehgal Foundation.

Information and Communication Technologies

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are effective tools for spreading information. They act as a bridge between the developed and underdeveloped worlds and the privileged and the under-privileged sections of the society.

Newspapers, magazines, television, radio and computers are some of the common ICT tools in use around the world. According to a World Bank report (2003), 22%, 28%, 23% and 21% of the global population have access to radio, television, telephones, and internet respectively. These figures show that a large number of people do not have access to information across the countries. However, when it comes to India, the accessibility is an even bigger problem. Accessibility and availability of media options vary significantly between states, districts, tehsils and even genders. The information gap is even wider in the rural areas. The rural people are mostly illiterate; they lack access to most of the vehicles of information. For instance, a baseline survey conducted by Sehgal Foundation on community radio in Mewat district of Haryana shows that only 7.8% people read newspapers, 1.2% magazines, and 20.1% and 12.5% of people have access to television and radio respectively.

Lack of information and opportunity to air opinions create a sense of exclusion in media. For addressing this, Communication for Empowerment (C4E) is a practical approach, developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It addresses the lack of inclusion and participation of marginalized and vulnerable groups in the decision-making processes by identifying and meeting their information and communication needs. Oslo Governance Centre, in collaboration with the Communication for Social Change Consortium, has developed a three-year C4E initiative (2007-2010). The Global Report on Communication for Empowerment (2010) observed that a number of issues are common to more than one country, some highlighting emerging trends, and others reinforcing existing knowledge and challenges. However, all of them have important implications for designing appropriate interventions to fill information and communication gaps. Some of the highlights of the report are :

- The dominant role of radio, particularly community radio, as an information medium, and a potentially strong communication channel for marginalized and vulnerable groups;

- The limited confidence and capacity of many people in using media to communicate;
- Differential access to media by men and women;
- The importance of mixing traditional and new information technologies in strategies designed to improve democratic governance and reduce poverty;
- The importance of a safe public space in providing support and expanding opportunities for communication and participation in the decision-making process;
- The growing importance of mobile telephony;
- The importance of a supportive legal and regulatory environment for media.

The findings of the UNDP's Global Report on Communication for Empowerment (2010) clearly highlight the importance of community radio as the most effective tool for addressing development issues for most of the under developed regions.

Community Radio

What is Community Radio?

Community radio carries information from policymakers to the grassroots. It facilitates the achievement of national and international goals of development. A community radio station is operated in the community, for the community, about the community, and by the community (UNESCO, 2002). A boon to rural people, community radio serves as a bridge between literate and not-so literate sections of the society. It empowers every section of a society by giving them opportunity to speak about their own issues at the local levels and represent them at the national levels.

In many parts of the world, community radios act as vehicles for community and voluntary sectors, civil society, agencies, NGOs, and citizens to work in partnership to further community development goals. Community radio is legally defined (as a distinct broadcasting sector) in many countries such as France, Argentina, South Africa, Australia, and Ireland. Much of the legislation includes phrases like "social benefit," "social objectives," and "social gain," as part of the definition.

Community stations serve geographic communities as well as communities of interest. They broadcast content that is popular and relevant to a local, specific audience but is often overlooked by commercial or mass-media broadcasters. Community radio is generally not for profit and provides a mechanism for enabling individuals, groups, and communities to tell their own stories, to share experiences, and become creators and contributors of media in this media-rich world.

Community radio has developed differently in different countries. Modern community radio stations serve their listeners by offering a variety of contents that are not necessarily provided by the larger commercial radio stations. A meme used by members of the Community Radio Movement is that community radio should be 10% radio and 90% community. This means, community radio stations focus on getting the community talk, and not solely on being a radio (which is a technological process). Hence, the social concerns of a radio are stressed over radio per se. Another distinction between community and mainstream stations is that the latter are viewed as pandering to commercial concerns or the personalities of presenters.

Indian scenario

In India, the campaign to legitimize community radio began in the mid-1990s, soon after the Supreme Court ruled on February 1995 that "airwaves are public property." The judgment inspired several free speech advocates, academics, and community members across the country to being a concerted campaign to legitimize community radio in India.

In 1996, Bangalore-based media advocacy group VOICES organized a gathering of community radio stakeholders. A declaration calling for the establishment of third tier of broadcasting, i.e., community broadcasting, was signed. In 2000, a UNESCO-sponsored workshop, hosted by Andhra Pradesh NGO Deccan Development Society (DDS), issued the "Pastapur Initiative" on community radio that urged the government to free broadcasting from state monopoly to its logical conclusion by making media space available not only to private players but also to communities. This landmark document urged the government to create a three-tier structure of broadcasting in India by adding non-profit community radio to the already existing state-owned public radio and private commercial radio.

Simultaneously, several initiatives had already been taken on community radio, in terms of production and dissemination of participatory programming. It included Sangam Radio, Namma Dhwani (Our Voices), and Kutch MahilaVikas Sangatan's initiative, among many others. Community groups in Chamba and Rudraprayag, both in Uttarakhand, started producing participatory programs to broadcast them over the World Space Satellite Radio network or narrowcast them using a playback machine.

By early 2003, the government of India released the first set of community radio guidelines, which unfortunately restricted eligibility to educational institutions only. Marginalized and voiceless communities continued to remain outside the ambit of the then-released community radio policy guidelines. The decision was protested by many activists, making way for a new policy.

On November 16, 2006, the government of India implemented new Community Radio Guidelines to permit NGOs, educational institutions, and agricultural institutions to own and operate community stations. Under the 2006 policy guidelines, any not-for-profit "legal entity" – except individuals, political parties (and their affiliates), criminal, and banned organizations – can apply for a community radio license. The license entitles them to operate a 100-watt (Effective Radiated Power) radio station, with a coverage area of approximately 12-km radius. A maximum antenna height of 30 metres is allowed.

Community radio stations are expected to produce at least 50% of their programs locally, as much as possible in the local language or dialect. The stress is on developmental programming, although there is no explicit ban on entertainment. News programs are banned on community radio in India (as they are on commercial FM radio). However, the government has clarified that certain categories of news are permitted on radio, including sports news and commentaries, information on traffic and weather conditions, coverage of cultural events and festivals, information on academic events, and public announcements on utilities, such as electricity and water supply, disaster warnings, and health alerts. Five minutes of advertising per hour is allowed on community radio. Sponsored programs are not allowed, except those involving local, state, or central government sponsorships.

By July 1, 2010, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting announced that 715 applications for community radio (CR) licenses had been received, including 104 under the old radio guidelines. 231 Letters of Intent were issued (including 63 under the old guidelines). Grant of Permission agreements were signed with 102 applicants, and 68 community radio stations went on air. 107 applications were rejected, and 377 applications were being processed.

By February 1, 2012, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting had received a total of 991 applications for community radio license. Grant of Permission agreements had been signed with 161 applicants and 126 community radio stations went on air.

The Community Radio Association was formed soon after the first convention of CR stations in 2011 in Delhi with 58 stations expressing their interest in April 2011 for the formation of an association, wherein people working on ground can represent their communities and bring the voices of the voiceless to the fore.

In April 1, 2012, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology hiked spectrum fees to Rs91,000, a five-fold increase from the previous annual fee of Rs19,700. This move triggered massive protest from functional community radio stations, advocacy bodies like the Community Radio Forum and the Community Radio Association of India. Even the secretary of the Ministry of Information and Broadcast went on record to say that the ministry's views were not sought before the decision had been made.

According to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting compendium on "Community Radio for Social Change" (March 2014), currently there are a total of 160 community radio stations in India. Tamil Nadu is the state with highest number (19) of community radio stations; whereas Uttar Pradesh (10), Delhi (6) and Haryana (5) lag far behind.

Alfaz-e-Mewat: A Case Study

An Introduction

Alfaz-e-Mewat is a community radio station, running in Mewat district of Haryana. It is the brainchild of Sehgal Foundation, a public charitable trust established in 1999. Sehgal Foundation has been working with the rural communities of Mewat for the past 15 years with a mission to strengthen community-led development initiatives to achieve positive social, economic and environmental change across rural India.

With a vision to see "every person across rural India empowered to lead a more secure, prosperous and dignified life," it is reaching out to rural people through face-to-face meetings, awareness drives and community-based events. It works primarily with the communities in Mewat, Haryana, and Alwar, Rajasthan, of India. The foundation team promotes grassroots, community-led development initiatives in three key program areas. The water management program focuses on improving the quantity and quality of water and water delivery systems in the community.

The agricultural development program promotes sustainable farming practices by empowering women farmers, increasing water conservation efforts, and improving crop productivity. A good rural governance program builds awareness and skills of individual citizens and village-level institutions in order to encourage the community's active participation in their own development. Community leaders and individual citizens are provided with knowledge, skills, and confidence to combat the poor conditions and inadequate delivery of services that afflict many rural areas.

The need for having a community media tool arose around 2010 in order to reach out to a critical mass of people, and at the same time, to give them a platform to voice their concerns. Based on an assessment of local knowledge, capabilities, and interests, Sehgal Foundation conceptualized its community media initiative to empower individuals and communities through information-based communications, community radio, and mobile technologies, and to help champion the voices of the most isolated and vulnerable populations by raising awareness and providing a platform for expression. The efforts bore fruit in 2012 when Sehgal Foundation launched the community radio station, Alfaz-e-Mewat(AEM) FM 107.8 (Rural Voices of Mewat). Today, the station is providing a public platform for rural communities to learn, discuss and debate important local issues and social programs. Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8 broadcasts 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and brings important messages in the local language on agricultural practices and techniques, nutrition, women and child health, as well as other social and cultural issues to Mewati households across 183 villages, including some villages on the Rajasthan border.

Aiming to empower people by giving them useful information, AEM started from the foothills of Aravallis in Haryana and is housed in a community centre of Ghaghas village, Mewat district, Haryana. To improve the quality of life of residents of Mewat by augmenting awareness, AEM reaches to more than 180 villages within a 20-km radius of Ghaghas. It offers a unique blend of programs on health and hygiene, education, highlights local issues, spreads awareness on rights and entitlements, and central government sponsored programs, for the welfare of under-privileged communities.

Listeners' profile

Since AEM covers the major portions/areas of Mewat, it becomes pertinent to know the demography of the region. Mewat is one of most backward districts in India despite being close to the national capital and the millennium city Gurgaon. The area, largely inhabited by an ethnic tribe Meo Muslims, is characterized by some of the lowest socio-economic development indices. Moreover, literacy is about 50%, in which female literacy accounts for 37%. Aggressive and deep-rooted patriarchy at home and violent behavior of male counterparts have kept the women of the region silent for ages. To worsen the situation, child marriage is a norm in Mewat, even in the 21st century. The situation in the health sector is also not faring well either. Only 15% of childbirths take place in hospitals. Large family size and small farm size have kept the people poor, adding to the already sorry conditions of the region.

The AEM has received over 14,000 calls from its listeners, including nearly 20% women. These women most often call to air their opinions on the programs broadcasted and request for songs. The feedback that the station gets in the form of recorded calls is sorted and included in the program "Mann Ki Baat" (straight from the heart). Such participatory programs give a sense of belonging to the listeners. Many listeners call up the station in order to hear their voices on air. In our over two years of broadcasting experience, they have observed that women of Mewat are not yet comfortable talking about women-centric issues. The reasons for this are the closed and conservative society and the fear of getting exposed on radio.

To engage them better, the station is focusing on programming that is based on women-centric issues, using a collaborative approach of learning from the community where women are involved right from the research phase of the program in all stages of production and post-production. Because of an integration of Community Learning Programming (CLP) techniques in programs, the listener base of AEM is expanding steadily. However, to gauge this better, it is imperative to see the media accessibility data of Mewat.

Media Accessibility in Mewat

A mid-term monitoring study of Alfaz-e-Mewat (Dec 2013) by Sehgal Foundation's Rural Research Center was carried out after one year of AEM's operations to explore five major domains: listenership, mode of

listening to radio, information channels, usage and benefits of information received via radio, and the relative importance of radio. The research used both quantitative and qualitative aspects. For quantitative method, the statistical facts have been obtained via detailed structured questionnaire from those 51 villages that were enlisted in the baseline survey carried out in November 2011-January 2012. The interim data collection was done from December 2012 to February 2013. The pre- and post-analysis approach was employed throughout the study to explore the scenario existing before and after the launch of AEM. The villages in the baseline survey were those who would be receiving radio signals within the radius of 20 kilometers after the launch of AEM. The village selection under each block was done using stratified random sampling approach.

Table 1 : Block-wise Sample

| Blocks | Number of Villages | Number of Matched Households |
|-----------------|--------------------|------------------------------|
| Nagina | 25 | 1235 |
| Nuh | 03 | 271 |
| Punhana | 17 | 265 |
| FerozepurJhirka | 06 | 107 |
| Total | 51 | 1878 |

Initially, the sample consisted of 2,427 households in the baseline survey. In the interim assessment, the attrition rate was 23% and thus responses from 1,878 households were compared. Keeping same respondent and same sample size made the research rigorous, ensuring data compliance and the consistency of respondents for measuring the progress of AEM.

The study found that mobile phones, television and radio sets are three vital media options locally available with the listeners of AEM. Of these, mobile phones outnumber all other media options with almost 90% respondents having access, followed by television. Over a one year period, there is a further addition of households by 4%, who now own mobile phones. Also, there is a rise (2.8%) in the percentage of households having mobile phones with radio facility. This clearly indicates that the percentage of households who bought mobile phones, half of them bought phones with radio facility.

The rising popularity of radio sets is apparent from the table below; there is an increase in the number of households by almost 4% who now own a radio set. The qualitative discussions in the villages reveal that AEM is one of the factors behind the increase in the purchase of radio sets. Although these figures are minuscule but they hint towards the scenario where inhabitants have started giving importance to radio, either by purchasing radio sets or mobile phones with radio facility.

Table 2 : Accessibility - Vital Media Options

| Source | Before AEM | After AEM |
|--------------------|------------|-----------|
| Mobile Phone | 90.2 | 94.3 |
| ➤ Radio in mobiles | 47.9 | 50.7 |
| Television | 17.3 | 18.7 |
| Radio Sets | 13.1 | 17.0 |

Note: N=1878; Figures are in Percentage

Other media options include newspapers, magazines, land-phones, and computers. Newspaper covers almost 8% of the households, whereas the other remaining three media options cover a small proportion of respondents ranging from 1-4%. Over a period of one year not much difference has been noticed in the accessibility trend to other media options by the sampled households.

Table 3 : Other Media Options

| Media Options | Before AEM | After AEM |
|----------------|------------|-----------|
| Newspaper | 7.6 | 7.5 |
| Magazine | 1.0 | 2.3 |
| Landline Phone | 2.8 | 1.2 |
| Computer | 3.9 | 2.0 |

Note: N=1878; Figures are in percentage

AEM accessibility

The report further points out that radio sets and mobile phones are two sources available in the rural setting for listening to AEM. Radio listeners have increased from 265 respondents in baseline study to 395 in the interim study after the introduction of AEM. However, it is important to note that this increase in the number of respondents cannot be attributed only to the introduction of AEM. It is plausible that the new respondents might be listening to other radio stations along with AEM.

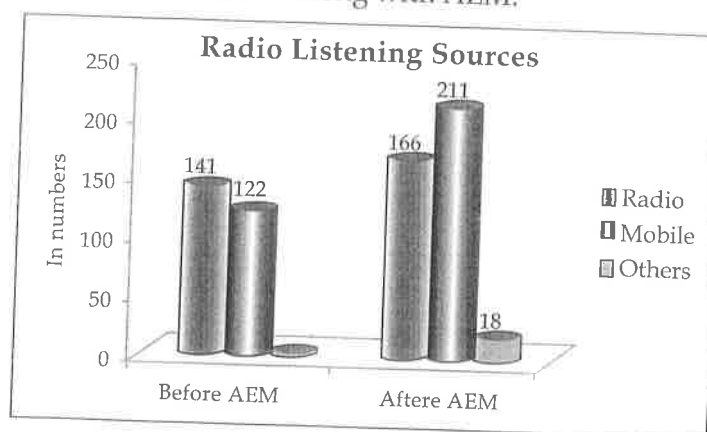


Figure 1 : Listening Radio: Sources

Note: N = 265 (Before AEM) and N = 395 (After AEM)

The qualitative analysis with female listeners of AEM revealed that women take equal interest in listening to AEM; however, they are not as vocal as men when it comes to voicing opinions. Another survey with female listeners of AEM from 6 villages makes us understand the patterns of radio usage by women.

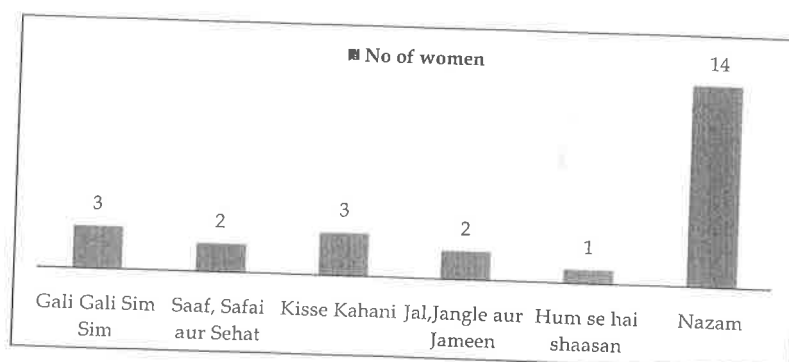


Figure 2 : Favourite Program on radio

Nazmis a major part of the Urdu poetry, normally written in the rhymed verse and also in modern prose style poems. In Mewat, the most popular form of Nazm is "naat" that specifically praises Prophet Muhammad. It is a hit among Muslim women. The other most favorite programs are Gali Gali Sim Sim (the Hindi language adaptation of the American children's television series Sesame Street for India that brings innovative engaging content maximizing the educational power of media to help children reach their highest potential) and KisseKahani (local folklore-based stories from Mewat and its people). People who like listening to other programs confessed that they liked it because they are informative and make them aware. For them, radio is therefore, not just a source of entertainment but an interesting blend of education, information as well as entertainment.

Further, AEM is an easily-accessible and effective platform to voice the views and concerns that are central to this marginalized Mewati community with low-literacy rates. Most of these issues are about the inadequacies in government schemes or shortfall in access to information.

Governance Challenges

To upscale the development of rural communities, the Government of India has introduced several schemes and policies, including the 73rd amendment to the Constitution, in which, in addition to state and national governance system, a third tier of governance – panchayats (village councils) – is added to mainstream the rural communities of India. The people in the rural areas are unaware of the role and responsibilities of panchayats. In fact, the experience of working in Mewathas revealed that the lack of knowledge about the welfare schemes of government prevents rural citizens from rising above the pathetic living conditions. There are times, when even the panchayat members are not aware of their roles and responsibilities to help people avail the benefits of the government - sponsored schemes due to lack of information. In fact, while working, there are many governance-related challenges faced by rural people in the region that has come to light. Some of the foremost challenges faced are :

- Bringing equal and active representation of women in all the local decisions.
- Bringing fair representation of deprived sections of the society in local decisions.
- Ensuring accountability and responsiveness of local activities.
- Raising awareness about the government initiatives.
- Ensuring constructive and active participations of Panchayati Raj Institutions.
- Enabling citizens to monitor and bring transparency in the functioning of government programs/schemes.

Information plays a primary role in the holistic development of society. As most people in Mewatare illiterate, they must be made aware of their rights and responsibilities, so they can route their complaints regarding local problems to the officials concerned. It will help them solve the local issues more effectively as rural people are generally unaware of the procedures. Further, community radio can motivate people to adopt better practices, such as sending their girls to school, using toilets, keeping surroundings clean, etc. Besides, it also accelerates the skill-building of villagers and helps in personality development.

To ensure that the subsidies and benefits of the government policies reach the right people, AEM strives to make them aware of the government initiatives, and motivate them to adopt better practices. It includes health, hygiene, education, sanitation, family welfare, etc.

Filling the gaps – Alfaz-e-Mewat's experience

To fill the information gaps, Sehgal Foundation employs a variety of ICTs tools, such as community radio, community newspapers, online medium, social media platforms, Radio over Phone (Vaani), wall painting, narrowcasting, and Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS), etc. The objective of using this media mix is to:

- Share local knowledge, capabilities, and interests with the outside world
- Operate in areas with limited access to mainstream media
- Empower individuals and communities through information-based communications
- Provide a platform to champion the voices of most isolated and vulnerable populations.

Community media plays an important role in strengthening governance. Alfaz-e-Mewat (AEM) is playing its bit in making information reach to the Mewat's community and taking their issues and concerns at various national and international platforms. AEM, being a cross-cutting strategic initiative, lends its support in spreading awareness about the Sehgal Foundation's programs. It also motivates people to be a part of the programs and become role models in their peer groups. Further, it also runs standalone campaigns related to agriculture, water management, and governance, and keeps a tab on their impacts. Some of such programs are listed below:

- 1 - Humse Hai Shasan (Governance by Us) gives information to villagers about their rights and entitlements. Under the format, government officials, local experts, and panchayat members share relevant information through radio programs. A call for action at the end of program informs villagers what procedure to follow and which department to contact for further information and addressing grievances.

- 2 - Broadcasts information related to gram sabhas (General Body of villagers): AEM broadcasts announcements of the dates of gram sabhas in villages, shares proceedings, and features micro planning exercises of villages.
- 3 - Mann ki Baat (Straight from the heart) is a program where AEM profiles listeners' feedbacks. The format of the program allows people to call to seek information, record their problems, and also share their voice and thoughts.
- 4 - Guftgu (conversations) is an interview-based program that gets up close with experts on government schemes to bring transparency and accountability. It also makes people aware of the provisions and benefits.
- 5 - Naidishayein (new directions) is a serialized programming on panchayats. It features panchayati raj system (third tier system of the constitution) and other government schemes in local language. The series was sponsored by Haryana Institute of Rural Development (HIRD).
- 6 - Dastak (A knocking) is a collaborative program on women's role in governance. The idea of the program is to highlight role models that inspire other women to become active participants of governance at community level. The program highlights the role of women in panchayats, need for mahilagram sabhas (General Body of village women), and profile grassroots heroes.

AEM also broadcasts collaborative programs on women's role in governance with Alwar Ki Awaz radio station through support from Manch (a forum for community media practitioners). Both the stations found that the socio-cultural milieu in Mewat and Alwar is similar. Since women in Alwar are much more empowered than their Mewat counterparts, the idea behind this program was to highlight role models that inspire women in Mewat as well as Alwar. The programs highlight the role of women in panchayats, need for women-only gram sabhas and profile grassroots heroes.

AEM Campaigns on Governance

- a) Alfaz-e-Mewat partnered with Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, (IIT-Delhi) to run a campaign on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) titled MGNREGA Mera Hak (MGNREGA, My Right). The campaign leverages the power of community radio and IVRS, to build awareness and audit the grassroots implementation of the scheme. The aim is to bridge the gap between villagers and district-level officials. The campaign paved way for citizen-led governance in villages as they monitor and report the inadequacies central government sponsored-MGNREGA scheme, and seek grievance redressal.

Effective from April 2014, the campaign has received over 540 calls in July and August 2014 from listeners, who have shared insights into the implementation gaps in MGNREGA in Mewat by recording their problems and grievances.

Alfaz-e-Mewat has also been part of Haryana Government's campaign on Right to Education called Shirkat-e-Taleem, (awareness drive on Enrollment).

Using voice calls to give information

In order to expand the reach of radio, AEM has integrated mobile technology with it. This pilot was done with 500 contacts initially, and it revealed that villagers falling out of radio coverage can be reached on governance-related schemes, their rights, and entitlements, through voice calls. In the full-fledged launch of the service, we will be reaching out to over 5,000 contact database.

Off-air activities

The off-air activities of AEM include mobilization meetings, promoting, supporting, and sharing outcomes of community events, such as legal literacy camps (village and block level), Mahila Gram Sabhas (General Body of village women), village leadership trainings, and micro-planning exercises in villages. Other activities organized by the station from time-to-time include community-level events featuring important days, such as Girl Child Day (focusing on child rights and entitlements), World Environment Day (focusing on water and sanitation issues), and the like.

AEM also meet the training needs of its radio jockeys. To promote good governance effectively, it is important that the community radio staff is trained to bring out the desired change. The outcomes of these trainings can be :

- Identification of local governance issues.
- Government program-related information to address the issue.
- Availability of content with information on program, ways for its monitoring / accountability mechanism, and grievance redressal mechanism.
- Ways to present the content in an interesting way to the community.
- Right documentation to help analyze the impact and scope of improvement.
- Interview skills to peel out information from various government officials, and others.
- Ensure stakeholders' involvement and sensitization.

Making the Difference

Since its inception in February 2012, AEM is working as an agent of social change in the lives of Mewat's residents. It is a platform that connects the local people by airing and discussing their needs, issues, and concerns. It has been found out that the women in the community are gradually gaining confidence to share their views openly on the radio station. Some of the ambitious young ones are motivated to make their career in the community radio and pitch-in to the welfare of their region. There are many like Mamta, Savita, and Saroj, the Radio Jockeys of Alfaz-e-Mewat, who want to come out and find voices for themselves.

"Earlier I was very scared. In fact, in my first recording, I was shivering with fear of voicing my thoughts. However gradually, I got used to the radio environment. I have gained so much confidence by working in a radio station that today I go out and talk to the men in community fearlessly. I like this freedom. With the help of Sehgal Foundation, I have also attended trainings/ workshops with other community radio stations, which further helped me in getting acquainted with the outside world", said Savita Verma, a radio jockey at Alfaz-e-Mewat radio.

Villagers, school children, and local artists take active part in the radio programs. Dozens of community members in Mewat have completed the station's six-month training course, learning how to operate equipment, produce programs, and manage the station as technicians, producers, and facilitators. The station's community-based management team has equal representation of women. Some of the achievements of AEM can be listed as:

- Calls received by the station demonstrate that listeners are more aware of entitlements and good practices in water conservation, sanitation, health, education, and agriculture.
- Villagers are in touch with the needs, aspirations, and views of their neighbors and nearby communities.
- Listeners can access selected program content toll free by cellphone.
- Awareness campaigns and programs produced at Alfaz-e-Mewat are shared with other community radio stations.

From the Field: Power of Information

A trendsetting woman Sarpanch changes / transforms the face of her village

"My name is Vimla, I am the Sarpanch of Sarai village of Mewat district in Haryana," she says to any visitor who meets her. Vimla is a leading example of leadership skills in the area of 'women in village governance'. "Sarai has seen many changes since I became the Sarpanch (village council head) four years back. Earlier, there were many problems, such as lack of water, electricity, and dirty roads. In January 2013, the panchayat (village council) undertook a micro-planning exercise in Sarai with the help of the S M Sehgal Foundation team. The entire village participated in the making of these micro plans. The panchayat then submitted applications to the district administration and got government funds leveraged to get paved roads constructed in the village, tube lights installed in the streets, water tanks, and individual latrines made in the houses," stated Vimla proudly.

Narender Kumar, the Community Capacity Builder at the S M Sehgal Foundation expressed, "When our organization started working in Sarai, it used to be waterlogged and dirty just like any other under-developed village in India. There were very few toilets in the village. Along with the Sarpanch and the other panchayat (village council) members, we did door-to-door mobilization to educate the villagers on the ill-effects of defecating in the open. Using funds from the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (Total Sanitation Campaign) government program, the panchayat got household latrines constructed in more than 80% of the houses in Sarai."

Vimla's enthusiasm and zeal to make a positive difference in her village made her overcome barriers of illiteracy and lack of confidence in dealing with government officials. "Earlier, I used to be little apprehensive talking to government officials as I do not know how to read or write. But slowly as I started meeting them more regularly, my confidence grew. I have never sent my husband or son to execute my panchayat-related work, which is a trend in Mewat. I always talk to the concerned authorities on my own."

Vimla serves as an inspiration to other women council members in the surrounding villages of the Mewat district in Haryana to emulate her example and discharge their official roles and responsibilities effectively. In Mewat, like many other backward areas in India, women are elected as panchayat members but their work is mostly carried out by the men folk in their families. Vimla has proved that women can be equally effective in leadership roles in governance.

Vimla's efforts have also integrated the work of the School Management Committees (SMCs) and the Village Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSCs) with the panchayats so that all village-level institutions work together for holistic development in Sarai. As the Sarpanch, she actively participates in the SMC and the VHSC meetings held on a monthly basis. She conducts surprise visits at the school on a regularly to ensure that the teachers are present, children are being taught properly, mid day meals are being cooked hygienically, and served on time to the children.

Vimla attends Panchayat training programs conducted by the S M Sehgal Foundation and acts as a motivator for other women who still function as proxy council members to take the reins of village development in their own hands. "When you don't have the confidence, then you have to slowly build it. Only when you seek information, you will get educated and empowered to realize the power of your own potential," she said encouragingly to other women elected representatives.

Conclusion

Information is a tool for empowerment. This holds even more importance in the rural setup of India, where people are unaware of their rights and duties and hence are not able to make use of the various government welfare schemes running for their benefit. The experience of Alfaz-e-Mewat in Mewat has illustrated that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can play a vital role in expediting the process of development in an under-developed region, if used properly.

However, to make a communication channel effective, the idea (content) and technology has to be made an integral part of the community, so that the community can take part in formulating messages and brainstorm in its presentation and style. The exercise is important for the effective use of ICTs; otherwise, people will not know what to do with it. Sensitization is the first step in introducing ICT. The purpose of this step is to determine the current state of ICT tools (which in most cases is absent) and to get an impression of how ICT tools might be useful for a community. If the outcome is that ICT is not beneficial in any way, it makes no sense to introduce it. But when it is concluded that ICT could be beneficial for a community in certain areas, then step two should be proceeded to. At this stage, it is important to cooperate with the local people to find out whether people are likely to be using this new technology. In most cases, people will only do this when they understand that the ICT tool can be beneficial for both the community and the individual, and that it can create opportunities. When it is considered likely that people will be benefiting from ICT and that they are going to use this new technology, people need to be trained on its use.

On the other hand, the ICT tools will not be used when the community realizes that these will not be beneficial for it. But it is not easy to determine what is beneficial for communities as it cannot be measured in tangible terms. One of the significant benefits of using ICTs, or community radio for that matter, is the sharing of knowledge and adopting the good practices by villages/community members after knowing about them.

For instance, the community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat helped the community members to know the inter-village practices. The role models featured on AEM inspired many listeners and hence helped them in moving ahead in life. Also, the villagers are in touch with the needs, aspirations, and views of their neighbors and nearby communities.

The Alfaz-e-Mewat has encountered a number of limitations as well. The biggest one was of ethical concerns and copyright issues. While gaining information on the subject, the community members, involved in the production of content for any radio program, find it difficult to demarcate between taking hint and using the same. For this, the AEM team is constantly guided and trained to understand the difference. This is heightened in case of those subjects on which district-level data or information is hardly available.

The sustainability of radio stations is another issue. It requires constant focused group discussions with the community members to find out their response on the changing schemes, problems, and times. Furthermore, the social limitations in the place like Mewat make the information gathering slow and frustrating.

However, despite all the issues, an effective ICT tool can expedite the process of development by motivating people to take an active part in the governance process.

Let power of information empower people.

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