

DIGITAL RIGHTS AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION SERIES **6**

# COMMUNITY MEDIA IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA - PART 2

Community media for community-driven  
access and rights

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

This issue of 'Perspectives' presents the case of community media (specifically community radio) as an important platform for communities to shape their own narrative. Through participation and ownership of their own media, communities can build on their culture, tradition, and indigenous knowledge. Through this, communities can also access a basic human right: freedom of expression.

Community media allows communities to access the information they need in order to advance their rights. Once well established, the potential of community media can be reached through community ownership and participation.

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## 2

## THE POWER OF COMMUNITY MEDIA – COMMUNITY RADIO

**Community media can be defined<sup>1</sup>** in the simplest form as: *media of, by and for a community*. *Media of* the community points to community ownership; *media by* the community directs us to the community (volunteer) broadcasters; and *media for* a community highlights the contents of the community media, focusing on securing that the many ‘communities within the community’ have the information they need to make informed decisions about and within their own lives.

**In and through community media, communities shape the narrative through dialogue and debate.** They communicate horizontally rather than vertically, ‘talking

together’ vs ‘talking at’, dialogical-sharing as opposed to top-down information being provided. A top-down information-providing station is better than nothing in a community with no other information sources of local relevance. But ‘our own’ community station, where the community shapes the narrative and shares challenges and celebrations, is more effective as a platform for development and desired community change. Community radio is “90% community, 10% radio”, as Zane Ibrahim, co-founder and the first Director of Bush Radio<sup>2</sup> in Cape Town, South Africa, is widely quoted as saying.

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1. ‘A community radio is a radio owned and managed by the community; the programmes are produced by the community and they deal with issues arising within and of relevance to the community. [http://www.amarc.org/documents/manuals/What\\_is\\_CR\\_english.pdf](http://www.amarc.org/documents/manuals/What_is_CR_english.pdf)
  2. Bush Radio is still going strong and this 5-minute video presents the role of Bush Radio in one of the poorest areas of Cape Town: <https://tinyurl.com/mtw36pc4>

## 3

## HUMAN RIGHTS AND COMMUNITY RADIO

Despite some positive developments, 2021 was a challenging year for African human rights. Continued human rights abuses went unpunished, and Amnesty International<sup>3</sup> called on African governments and relevant non-state actors to take bold actions to address many concerns, including civilians paying the price of protracted armed conflicts. In 2021, this was the case in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia and South Sudan, which committed war crimes and other severe violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. In some instances, such violations amounted to crimes against humanity.<sup>4</sup>

As conflicts raged, the Covid-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on human rights in Africa, leading to school closures and disruption to learning, with children in conflict-affected countries experiencing additional difficulties accessing education. Measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 provided governments with justification for repressing the right to dissent and other freedoms, banning peaceful protests, citing health and safety concerns, and using excessive force to break them up.

Authorities also continued to silence human rights defenders or criminalise them. Governments took measures to close civic spaces and curtail media freedom, while gender discrimination and other forms of inequality remained entrenched in many African countries. Significant concerns included spikes in gender-based violence, limited access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, early and forced marriages, and the exclusion of pregnant girls from schools. Meanwhile, LGBTQI+ people faced harassment, arrest and prosecution for their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

Civil society and community media are at the core of holding governments to account, as well as institutions making

decisions affecting people's lives without their involvement. At an international level, the credibility and value of the UN human rights system is underpinned by the participation of these and other actors of civil society, through their contributions of expertise and awareness-raising, monitoring and reporting, and mobilisation of public support.

The role of community media in promoting human rights and fostering socio-economic development belongs at the forefront of building sustainable societies. Whereas it can be complicated for a community media movement to take root in environments where human rights and freedom of expression are not in place, community media have human rights – in all its forms and shapes – at the core of their mission. In impact assessments of community media, examples of how stations have helped advance a concrete understanding of the community's rights are many, often with impressive empowerment resulting from knowing the rights and how to exercise them, as described above.

The African Commission for Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR), in the *Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to information in Africa*, underscores that State parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights 'shall create an enabling environment for the exercise of freedom of expression and access to information'.

Community media plays an enormous role in promoting human rights in their communities, the most important being giving a voice to the voiceless, giving them the ability and means to communicate and express themselves, thereby setting their own development agendas. Beyond freedom of expression or the right to information, the right to communicate can be paraphrased as 'the right to express oneself and, in addition, not only to be heard but also to have one's socio-cultural and lived experience taken into account in discourse, decision-making and development at all levels'.<sup>5</sup>

3. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/africa/report-africa/>

4. Ibid

5. Paraphrased from the writings of Professor Cees Hamelink, communication scholar, earlier based at the International Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands.

Structurally, community radio embodies the right to communicate by consciously dedicating its portion of the airwaves and availing broadcast technology to those least able to communicate. Operationally, the participatory approach of community media gives voice to those least heard and facilitates the development of more equitable communities. Thus, community media are a singular vehicle for pursuing the goal of realising human rights for all, especially those who tend to be left behind.

In this way, community media are well placed to assist African states in fulfilling all the aspects of the Banjul Charter, laying out the many ways in which they can promote and support frameworks which advance human rights. Community media are effective vehicles to contribute to this, reaching communities not always reached by other media.

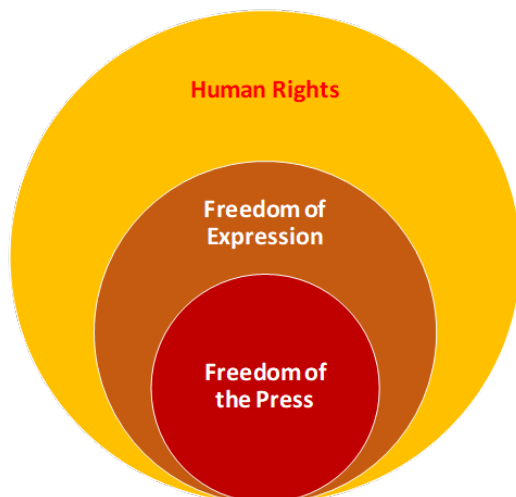
## 4

# COMMUNITY MEDIA ARE TRUSTED MEDIA

Communities tend to trust information shared on community media if the media are community owned and organised, driven in a participatory way, use local languages, implement cultural practices and uphold the non-negotiables of community media. Communities will follow the health, agricultural, educational and other advice of the media and promote the rights-based ways advocated for.

In this way, community media further amplify the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>6</sup> article XIX stressing that:<sup>7</sup>

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*



1. **Human rights** form the overriding framework.
2. **Freedom of expression** is one area within the overall human rights umbrella. It is a broad framework including different types of expression: personal, artistic, through the media, verbal and non-verbal and so on.
3. **Freedom of the press or media freedom** constitutes an important subset of the overall freedom of expression. This particular area is often – for many good reasons – under particular scrutiny and enjoys broader attention.

Community media operate in all three realms.

6. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

7. Quoted as the Banjul Charter, refers to other human rights declarations.

## 5

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND COMMUNITY MEDIA

Access to information is critical for enabling citizens to exercise their voice, monitor and hold the government accountable effectively, and enter into an informed dialogue about decisions which affect their lives. In this way, community media enables communities to set their own development agendas, which is, in itself, a human right. It is vital for empowering all citizens, including vulnerable and excluded people, to claim their broader rights and entitlements.<sup>8</sup> But the potential contribution to good governance for access to information lies in the government's willingness to be transparent, as well as the ability of citizens to demand and use information – both of which may be constrained in low-capacity settings.

Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights,<sup>9</sup> often simply referred to as the Banjul Charter, focuses on the right to receive information and free expression:

*Article 9*

*1. Every individual shall have the right to receive information.*

*2. Every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the law.*

Access to information (A2I) or freedom of information (FOI) legislation is an essential part of the enabling environment for citizen access to information, securing government openness and responsiveness to requests for information. While many countries still lack adequate legal provisions for the right to information, important advancements have occurred. Since 2004, the number of countries with freedom of information (FOI) laws in Africa has grown from 4 to 25. But passing a law

is one thing; turning it into a tool that gives citizens genuine access to information about the workings of their governments and administrations is another. For those countries with FOI laws in place, the focus is now on implementation.<sup>10</sup>

Experts suggest the main obstacles include a failure of political leadership, a culture of secrecy, low public awareness, and institutional barriers.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, securing full and genuine implementation of FOI laws represents a major task, that many governments find overwhelming.

For instance, Liberia signed the Sirleaf Johnson flagship Freedom of Information Act into law on 26 September 2010, making it the first West African country with a freedom of information act. The law envisaged the establishment of an independent oversight body of the Information Commissioner and the establishment of an Independent Information Commission (IIC).<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the Act has never been fully implemented.

However, there has not been any shortage of civil society attempts to invigorate the intents and services of the FOI and IIC, including the Carter Centre's development of a Citizen's Guide to FOI, and the Open Government Partnership in 2015, intended to appoint several public information officers to be able to answer the public's queries.<sup>13</sup> With state institutions not having the human resources and institutional capacities needed to respond promptly to FOI requests, international cooperation partners are working to support the Liberian government in implementing the Act.

8. <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/communication-and-governance/access-to-information-and-its-constraints/>

9. The ACHPR was adopted in 1981 and entered into force in 1986.

10. OSISA

11. Carter Centre, 2010.

12. The IIC is a government institution created by an Act of the National Legislature on 16 September 2010 and published into handbill by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 6 October 2010. The role of the commission is to ensure that this fundamental right is enforced and adhered to by the government. The primary responsibilities and functions of the Information Commissioner (IC) are tied to three distinct yet inter-related components: enforcement; compliance; and outreach and public awareness. The IIC website, presenting the objective, mandate, and strategic framework of the IIC to implement the Act, shows only four information requests, two successful and two still pending, all from 2015.

13. This was to happen in collaboration between Ministry of Information, Cultural Affairs and Tourism, the Carter Centre, CEMESP, IIC, Federation of Liberian Youth, Open Society Initiative for West Africa, and Center for Transparency and Accountability in Liberia.



The degree to which access to information leads to greater citizen participation, state accountability, and state responsiveness is being challenged.<sup>14</sup> In many developing countries, structural and political barriers affect governments' ability and incentive to provide information. This, in turn, affects citizens' ability to claim their right to information and use it to demand better governance and public services.

The structural and political barriers centrally refer to the immenseness of the task (the capacity building required to put information officers in all departments of all government offices not only centrally but also locally) and the lack of political will to be transparent. Genuinely adopting transparency and openness takes time, especially when coming from a very hierarchical and – in many cases – authoritarian legacy around most institutions and persons in authority.

Still, access to information is an indispensable pillar of democracy which, besides enabling the free flow of information and advancing the promotion and protection of human rights, is a prerequisite for civil society being able to hold authorities to account.

In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, access to the information held by public bodies has been recognised as a necessary facilitating mechanism for public engagement across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with special emphasis on access to information policies worldwide embedded in SDG 16.

Community media could and should come in here as the powerful, insistent advocacy and educational platform to insist on and advance A2I/FOI. To perform this role, broadcasters need to understand their rights regarding such legislation and how to hold authorities to account effectively. This closely

relates to the introductory sections of this paper as it requires a station with a rights-based agenda to drive the campaign and the capacity to implement the plan, both as the rights-holders of access to information and driver of the process.

Community radio transmission of accurate and unbiased information is crucial to reduce inter-community tensions and to empower people. "Getting timely, effective, fair and accurate information to every village, every community, every citizen is critical in keeping a lid on tensions, particularly now with the upsurge of violence in the area," says Mamadou Bocoum, Director of Kaoural radio and Regional Coordinator of Union of Radio and Television Broadcasting Union (URTEL) in Mopti, Central Mali. In Mopti, where remoteness and limited infrastructure cause isolation to many communities, community radios are often the only media to connect them to each other and the world.

While there is no 'one size fits all' system, principles of independence, accessibility, affordability, timeliness, and specialisation are paramount. Some enforcement models<sup>15</sup> for access to information laws are already in use in several countries where the judiciary, an ombudsman or a commissioner have received training.

Such systems include:

- judicial proceedings;
- an information commission(er) or appeals tribunal with the power to issue binding orders; or
- an information commissioner or ombudsman with the power to make recommendations.

14. <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/communication-and-governance/access-to-information-and-its-constraints/>

15. 'Exploring the Role of Civil Society in the Formulation and Adoption of Access to Information Laws: The Cases of Bulgaria, India, Mexico, South Africa and the United Kingdom.' A. Puddephatt, A. 2009. Communication for Governance and Accountability Program. World Bank. Washington DC.

## 6

## ACCESSING THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE PAST TO BUILD A STRONG TOMORROW

When talking about access to information, we think about getting access to the information available from decision-makers to hold them to account. This is painfully and painstakingly important. It is, however, also important to remember to secure access to information from within the community in the form of indigenous knowledge, the community's intangible heritage – their resources from the past.

Community media promote human rights, including the rights of women and minorities. They give communities a voice and allow them to define their future. Through this, community identity is strengthened by building on local culture and by celebrating the parts of the tradition of importance for the future. Community media is a platform on which indigenous knowledge and heritage can be documented, archived and shared along with the intangible cultural heritage. This covers all from remembering the past through storytelling by the elders, remembering traditional ways to work the land, and the often very valuable and valued initiation processes. All these are at the core of strengthening local identity and agency.

The Tanzanian professor and author, Penina Mlana, in her book on culture and development,<sup>16</sup> stresses how the locally anchored, participatory processes will generate different stepping stones, different sub-activities, towards the desired results but even more so the ownership and buy-in by the communities themselves – and hence much better end-results.

She underscores how such an understanding of listening to people is not always well understood:

*Development strategies in Africa have often disregarded the grassroots view and given little consideration to the incorporation of development action into the way of life of the communities concerned. By neglecting the peoples' cultures, this approach to development has also led to a disregard of local communication processes through aspirations for development.*

Mlana here highlights the importance of identifying and, where possible and relevant, making appropriate use of indigenous communication forms.

In Mozambique, the women responsible for the initiation rites of young girls have generally updated their traditional initiation advice on how to live well in a woman's body and lead a healthy sex life, with knowledge and advice about HIV/Aids, safe abortion and contraception. It is crucial not to remove such traditions and expertise, as there would be nothing replacing it, and in a reality with a very high percentage of women being illiterate and without much schooling, this system is important.

In Kenya, farmers in one community knew how to read the movement of the birds, forewarning them about locusts coming. This helped them prepare and get through locust storms much better than those without that indigenous knowledge.

16. Mlana, Penina Muhando. 1991. Culture and Development. The popular theatre approach in Africa. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT THIS PROJECT

*fesmedia* Africa is the regional media project of the Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Africa. Its work promotes a free, open, liberal and democratic media landscape that enables ordinary citizens to actively influence and improve their lives, as well as those of the communities and societies they live in. *fesmedia* Africa believes that in order to participate in public life and decision-making, people need to have the means, skills and

opportunities to access, exchange and use information and knowledge. They need to be able to communicate and exchange ideas, opinions, data, facts and figures about issues that affect them and their communities.

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