

Challenges and Opportunities of Community Radio Stations in Tanzania

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Abstract: This paper assessed challenges and opportunities of community radio stations in Tanzania. Using secondary data sources from scholarly publications the research takes a qualitative and descriptive approach. Results show that community radio have been well accepted and are making inroads in enhancing access to information and stimulate social dialogue in rural communities. However, they are constrained by their small size, small, poor funding, and hostile operating environment. Much of their perils could be addressed by deliberate policy intervention.

Keywords: community radio, challenges, opportunities.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tanzania has over 40 community radio stations owned by communities through trusts, community-based organizations, and local government authorities especially in the rural areas. Community radios started to emerge as an outcome of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) implemented in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These policies among other things, led to liberalization of radio airwaves democratic reforms (Fraser & Estrada, 2001; Peterson, 2004). The enactment of the Broadcasting Services Act in 1993 ended a 30-year state monopoly of radio broadcasting services and made it possible for private individuals, businesses and communities to establish radio stations in the country. The liberalization of broadcasting witnessed a proliferation of commercial radio stations and reorganization of the state broadcasting service into the public broadcasting model which, according to Peterson (2004) created a vacuum in the sense that the former concentrated on making money while the latter focused on broad-national issues. Community radio stations, therefore, opened a new front where remote communities that are not effectively covered by public radio services and commercial stations, to establish radio stations for their own local development agenda.

In theory, community radio initiatives stem from participatory communication theories developed, in part by a Brazilian Educator and Philosopher, Paulo Freire who in his acclaimed work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) proposed that communication should be conceived as dialogue and participation between communicators and receivers in order to facilitate conscientization which leads receivers (audience) to become active participants in the process of identifying and solving their own problems. Participatory communication theories received a further boost after an International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, chaired by Sean MacBride published its report in 1980 and argued that in order to share information, knowledge, trust, commitment, and the right attitude in development projects participation is very important in any decision-making process for development.

Community radios in Tanzania are fairly studied and documented. Mrutu (2008) was one of the early scholars to dwell into the concept of community radio in the country. His study found that community radio had contribution in social economic development where they operated. However, his study relied on very small sample size. Mpehongwa (2010) extended the investigation into the social economic impact of community radios by doing extensive field work in two major geographical zones of the country (Northern and Lake Victoria Zone). The findings confirmed community radio role in enhanced access

to information, promotion social accountability among local government leaders in rural areas, and general social development agenda. However, they were marred by internal and external challenges making them ineffective.

Bello and Wilkinson (2016), and Mpehongwa (2023) examined community radio as public sphere and its potential impact on political action. They found that, community radios have increased participation avenue for rural and marginalized communities albeit in small ways. These studies also indicated huge potentials of community radios but they are still bogged down by internal and external challenges.

Ng'atigwa (2013) studied community radio's socio-religious aspects and the promotion of national cohesion and concluded that, if not well guided by policy, they could stir negative religious sentiments that could counter national cohesion.

Other researchers such as Lobulu (2010), Audience Scapes (2010), examined the role of community media focusing on challenges and opportunities for democratization and national development. They concluded that community radio had potentials in the process of democratization but still they have a long way to effectively make full impact

In summary, majority of authors indicated the existence of internal and external problems that makes most community radio ineffective. However, none studied the challenges and opportunities of community radio in Tanzania in details. This paper therefore, reviewed the previous studies on community radio in Tanzania and attempted to respond to two main research questions; 'what are challenges facing community radio stations in Tanzania, and What are opportunities for community radio stations in Tanzania

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper used documentary review to respond to the research questions. It reviewed the existing studies on community radio, latest policy documents from the Tanzania Regulatory Authority (TCRA) and key informants' interviews to gather the required data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Related to Legal and Regulatory Framework

Community radio stations are part of the large broadcasting sector regulated by the Tanzania Communication Regulatory Authority (TCRA). This government agency is empowered by the Broadcasting Services Act (1993) and the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority Act (2003). The Electronic and Postal Communications for Regulating Community Broadcasting (2023) recognize community radio as one of the broadcasting tiers in Tanzania. Others are public broadcaster, non-commercial and commercial broadcasting services. However, the registration procedures and tariff, do not distinguish community radio stations from other forms of radio broadcasting. Community radio stations applicants, thus are subjected to rigorous scrutiny as any other radio service applicant. The disadvantage is that, since community radio are small, often not adequately funded broadcasting initiatives, they would not be able to comply easily. This means that, some promising and prospective radio stations do not see the light of the day, just at the application stage.

Community radio definitional ambiguities: The second challenge at regulatory level is the definition of community radio. The Electronic and Postal Communications for Regulating Community Broadcasting (2023) define community radio as a nonprofit broadcasting service aimed at specific community whose ownership and operation must be by the community it serves. The community in the same regulation is defined as people living in the same geographical area, who have similar characteristics and interests. In terms of ownership, the regulation outlines that the 'community' can own a radio through learning institutions, local government authorities, community-based organizations, and non-governmental organizations.

An analysis of the definition of the community radio, reveal a number of conflicting issues. First, the legal definition and indeed the regulations sidelines 'community of interest' in ownership and operation of radio stations in the country. Community of interest could be groupings such as religious, football fans, chicken farmers, and the like. They are not necessarily living in one geographical area, but form a community because they are connected by common interests.

The government definition of community radio in Tanzania prescribe local government authorities as one of the legal entities permitted to own and operate community radio. Local Government Authorities (LGAs) include District Councils (in rural areas), and Town Councils, Municipal Councils and City Councils (in urban areas). They are essentially a devolved unit of the central government. The underlying assumption of decentralization is that because of close positioning to its constituency, LGAs are better able to address local needs, bring decision-making process closer to citizens, would allow

the marginalized and those living in periphery to have their voice and aspirations heard by policy makers (De Graaf, 2005). However, operations of LGAs in Tanzania have largely remained an extension of central government as correctly pointed out by Mpehongwa (2023). Although policy focus is on decentralization by devolution, the mindset of many policy makers has reminded that of centralist administration (Cooksey and Kikula (2005). Local government authorities are still sandwiched in strict bureaucracy who leaves little freedom to plan and act independently. When LGAs own and operate community radio, the stations may continue to function as an extension of government and participation of ordinary citizens maybe be constrained.

In additional, another challenge at regulatory level is the definitional disagreement between policy makers and community radio practitioners in Tanzania. The legislation mentioned above defines community radio as nonprofit broadcasting services focusing on a specific community with social development agenda. Using this definition, TCRA has registered only 17 community radio stations in the country. However, union of community radio practitioners through their umbrella known as *Tanzania Development Information Organization (TADIO)*¹ define community as any station that focuses on community social economic agenda. They have thus included religious radio stations, private philanthropic radio stations, and radio owned by higher learning institutions. Using the definition, they have registered 43 community radio stations.

The implication of this disagreement is that, some genuine community radio station may be alienated by legislation and accused as operating as 'community radio' while they are not registered as such. In a survey of 19 community radios in Tanzania, Internews (2017) confirmed this definitional disagreement and noted that indeed it was difficult to distinguish private philanthropic commercial radio stations from genuine community radio stations. They noted that there is a danger of opportunists' radio stations (for commercial or political motives) to easily pass as community radios in order to either access some opportunities inherit in the community broadcasting genre or attract listeners.

Unfriendly regulatory and operating environment were also reported by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC, 2007) as one of the major obstacles for successful community radio stations in Africa. Many things cause restrictive and ambiguous regulations but chiefly among those include fear among policy makers of empowering the grassroots, which is not common in Africa. It should be noted that independence leaders were either preoccupied with national building strategies biased toward centralization. However, other African leaders were simply wary of internal opposition therefore muzzled independent voices (Kilimwiko, (2002).

Challenges related to operating environment

Community radio operating in LGAs jurisdiction: Majority of community radio stations in Tanzania are based in rural or semi urban areas under the jurisdiction of Local Government Authorities (LGAs). In the previous sub section, we saw that although local government authorities are legally constituted and provided for in the constitution of Tanzania, their operations have largely remained an extension of central government. As a result, they tend to mistrust community radios and at times refuse to cooperate with them as correctly pointed out by Mpehongwa (2023). In absence of information dissemination policy at LGA level further compound the problem, and indeed makes community radio toothless in fostering social accountability of leaders.

Effects of local elites on community radio: Creation of LGAs through centralization has created local elites who control businesses, politics as well as resources at the grassroots. Reinikka and Svensson (2004) call this unintended consequence of decentralization as 'local capture'. Local elites often include ruling and opposition politicians, businessmen and women, influential farmers, and religious leaders. They view community radio stations as medium that is disturbing status quo and thus not entirely happy with its existence. Mpehongwa (2023) reported an incident in Sengerema Community Radio (Mwanza Region), where a local businessperson was involved in some dubious deals worth reporting. When the news was aired by the community radio, the businessmen stormed the station and threatened the staff. The police had to intervene to solve the matter.

In this regard, community radios operate under constant threats from LGAs, as well as some local elites who view it as a threat to their status quo. Given their size and precarious financial situations, the possibility of community radios to being muzzled and complicity is very high.

¹ See <https://tadio.co.tz/www/en/>

Challenges within the Community Radio Stations

Vulnerability due to size: Due to their small size (in terms of finance, scale of operation, remote location and mode of operations) community are inherently weak or vulnerable unless shield by strong legislations and civil societies. The legislation to protect and nurture community radios are nonexistent in Tanzania. As for civil societies, Lange, *et al* (2000) noted that the country was still at formative stage (mushrooming stage) and only a few has developed into civic organizations. Also, they are still concentrated in around major cities and in the north part of the country. In this regard, civil societies which are catalyst for mass consciousness are inadequate in rural and semi urban areas where community radio operates.

Financial insolvency: Community radios are associative, community-based and operate in specific locality. However, majority of communities, especially in rural areas who are supposed to own and operate community radio are themselves facing a lot of more social economic challenges. Data from the National Bureau of Statistics indicates that 49% percent of the population lives below national poverty line and majority are in rural areas. Also, the bureau notes that vulnerability is also still high where for every four Tanzanians who moved out of poverty, three fell into it. Poverty explains why majority of community radio stations in the country are either funded by external donors, subsidized by local governments, are operated by religious-based organizations or powerful philanthropic business individuals. A survey by Internews (2017) found that as of 2017, about USD 5.4 million was invested in a number of stations by groups including UNESCO (35 stations), BBC Media Action (24), Tanzania Media Fund (13), Farm Radio International (11), Search for Common Ground (7) and Farmer Voice (7) stations. And some stations are funded by two or three of these organizations simultaneously.

Although the theory of community radio portrays the stations as ‘independent’ ‘alternative to the mainstream media’ this depiction is questionable in Tanzania given that none of the existing community radio is internally funded. Community radios funded by external organizations, local government or private individuals cannot claim to be free from biases or interferences and thus bring forth a question of impartiality. Bello and Wilkinson (2017) noted that many community radios fall in temptation to embrace commercial support for the sake of sustainability. Poor financing has led to many stations drifting to entertainment and at times infotainment simply because it is cheap to produce but at the same time attract audience and by extension advertisers. Ironically, The Electronic and Postal Communications for Regulating Community Broadcasting (2023) forbid community radio to attract and advertise any major commercial entities. They are therefore yearning for the advertiser’s money but restricted by regulations.

The financial challenges make community radio weak and vulnerable to intimidation by local and regional powers that be. Also, leads to poor salary or poor remuneration, inadequate equipment, low capacity generators, insufficient working space, unprofessional productions and high staff turnover as pointed out by Sungu and Kopoka (2019).

Poor training of journalists: Another internal challenge is poor training of journalists, radio operators and the management of community radio stations. Since majority of the stations are based in rural and remote locations, it is challenging to hire and retain competent workers in such circumstances. This, in the long run, affect quality of the radio content, management and sustainability of the stations. In a study of 19 community radio stations in Tanzania, Internews² found that majority of the journalists and editors had basic journalistic knowledge but lacked knowledge of the local pressing issues. For example, in Mtwara and Lindi Regions, majority had no idea on how to involve residents in gas and oil after the resources were discovered in their vicinity.

The same was witnessed in Sengerema, Karagwe and Simanjiro Community radio stations where journalists did not consider local government operations critical for residents’ social economic development, and thus paid less attention to its operations and news generated there (Mpehongwa, 2023).

Prospects and Opportunities of Community Radios in Tanzania

Coverage and Proximity to the people: In Tanzania, majority of the community radios are located in rural, remote and periphery parts of the country. The 63% of the country’s 66 million population lives in rural areas and 32% lives in rural areas. Specifically, community radios are presence in all parts of the country except north western region of Tabora, central

² Internews is an international nonprofit with 30 offices around the world, including headquarters in California, Washington DC. They surveyed 19 community radio stations in Dar es salaam, Arusha, Mtwara and Lindi

region of Singida, and Songea in the South. TADIO³ estimates that community radios cover almost 70% of Tanzania and reach a listenership of over 33 million people. Community radio covers areas that are not well covered by other mainstream media. In a country where radio is by far the most popular media across the whole country, where 45% use it as a daily news source, community radio holds the potential to bridge informational gap in the county.

Community radio and audience participation: Carpentier (2011) outlined two types of participation namely participation ‘through’ the media and participation ‘in’ the media. The former deals with the opportunities for participation availed to the general public through the existence of media. While the later (participation ‘in’ the media) focuses on participation of the audience in the production of media content, and management.

With regard to audience participation ‘in’ the station, community radio offers unique opportunity for ordinary citizens to participate in the management and content production because of close their proximity to the audience, and its *modus operandi*. This is an important function that is not feasible in most of the mainstream media. Community radio allows its audience, who in most cases are vulnerable member of the society, to voice their aspirations, dialogue, and engage policy makers and in sense empower them. Alumuku (2006) notes that community radio is a two-way process that is considered an effective community empowerment tool as it has opportunities to identify various problems around them and also create solutions to those problems.

As for participation of the audience ‘through’ the station, community radio offers a number of avenues in which ordinary members of the community can participate in public life. In a survey of four community radio stations in Tanzania, Mpehongwa (2023) observed that community radio stations are indeed an *arena* for information sharing and social dialogue in areas where they operate. Community radios have opened extra-avenues for common citizens to interact between themselves and the local leaders. Participants in the radio educational and discussion programs are local leaders like health officials, councilors and technocrats like village and ward executive officers. It means that with community radio ordinary citizens can now get an opportunity to question their leaders on the spot and without fear of being victimized. However, the contribution is still meagre compared to the potential of the community radio stations. This is because of lack of policy or framework that would recognize the existence of alternative means of providing citizens with information such as community radios, and lack of political will to enact such a policy.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper reviewed challenges and opportunities of community radio in Tanzania. It has established that, challenges of community radios are mainly in regulatory framework, operating environment as well as internal issues (constrained by their small size, small and poor funding). Much of challenges facing community radio stations could be addressed by deliberate policies. As for the prospects, it has established that community radio offers unique avenue for marginalized communities to dialogue with themselves and the colleagues at national level. Also, their coverage of 70% offers an opportunity for citizen participation, access to information and stimulate social dialogue in rural and remote parts of the country.

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³ <https://tadio.co.tz/www/en/about-us/>

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