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Assignment Report  
Nepal Community Broadcasting

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N E P A L

Community Broadcasting

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The views expressed are those of the authors  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Background and justification of the project	2
Mission objectives	3
II. FINDINGS	4
III. CONCLUSIONS	8
IV. RECOMMENDATIONS	8

ASSIGNMENT REPORT

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The best introduction to Nepal is the description by Kiranmani A. Dikshit in his chapter, «The Old Lady and the Farmers» (Rural Radio: programme formats; Paris: Unesco, 1979).

«The problem of communication in Nepal is as high as the mountains. Some 12 million people live mainly on a subsistence agriculture of the rectangular-shaped country of 90,000 square kilometres. Nature divides Nepal into four major zones. Situated between the Indian frontier and the foothills of the Siwalik, the Tarai is a strip of flat alluvial plains 200 metres above sea level. The northern part of the Tarai is covered with marshes and jungle and is densely populated. This is our rice bowl.

«The Siwalik hills rise straight out of the Ganges plain. There are very few villages in this chain which rises up to 2,000 metres.

«Abrupt and gigantic, the Himalayas tower majestically with dense primeval forests at 4,000 metres. Here are found luxuriant, impenetrable underwood and magnificent trees - especially the famous Himalayan cedar. Rivers have eroded the mountain sides and formed wide valleys where the Tibetans dwell.

«For centuries these mountains have not only protected Nepal from invasion, but also isolated it from modernization. Trade paths link towns and villages, but most of these are too steep to be made into vehicular roads. Travel is mainly on foot. People carry heavy loads in baskets, supported by a band across the forehead or on yokes across their shoulders. The 400-odd cars that were in the Katmandu valley before 1951 had to be carried by porters across the mountains from India.

«There are two basic cultural traditions in Nepal, the Indo-Hindu tradition from the Tarai plains and the Buddhist tradition from the Himalayas as in what is now known as Tibet. In the Katmandu valley, one can find the oldest Buddhist stupa in the world, Swyambhunath, and one of the holiest Hindu shrines, Pasupatinath. But many of the people still believe in evil spirits, witchcraft and superstition. If a paddy field is infested with insects, the farmers smoke the fields at night and beat drums, hoping that the evil spirits will go away and the insects will die. In this situation, where farm practices are tied in with customs and traditions, the farm broadcaster has to be careful not to counter tradition too roughly and possibly alienate his audience. This is just one of the challenges of scientific farming.

«Most of the people speak the official language, Nepali, though there are at least forty dialects as well.

«Life for the ordinary people has changed little in the last thousand years. The traditional halo is still the basic tool for ploughing the land. The whole family is engaged in farming from morning to night, from childhood to old age. Farming is the basic way of life. Hence, agriculture is one of the priority programmes of the government.»

### Background and justification of the project

2. There is no question that radio offers the most cost effective method of communication for Nepal, given the country's mountainous terrain and widely scattered population. But radio, to be effective, must be oriented to the socio-economic needs of the people living in isolated rural communities. There is need not only for reaching these people with messages, but also for bringing their messages to the attention of national and local leaders for appropriate reply or remedy.

3. Pioneer community radio projects in the Mahaweli region of Sri Lanka and in Homa Bay, Kenya, have demonstrated that radio, well-thought out, planned and produced in co-operation with villagers can be highly effective in keeping a community informed, in smoothing relationships with development officers, and in stimulating action conducive to local development.

4. In Kenya, engineers of the Voice of Kenya assembled a ten watt transmitter and set up broadcast experiments along the shores of Homa Bay. It was believed that if engineers were engaged in the very design and assembly of their own transmitters they would be more knowledgeable about its operation and maintenance, and would be more prepared to keep it on the air. People from the surrounding villages contributed programme contents, information and participated in the broadcasts which reached an area of some 29 kilometres in radius. Though only a short-term experiment, the Homa Bay station and its findings have been of great interest to broadcasters in other countries, particularly Sri Lanka where the same transmitter design was used to construct two transmitters destined for a local FM station in Guirandurokotte. In this case, the station would be manned by personnel from the Mahaweli Community Radio project, which aims specifically at organizing the production of radio programmes by the community themselves. An offshoot of this project was that one of the transmitters assembled by the Sri Lankan technicians was brought to Maldives where it now serves as a specialized programme service for the international community on the atolls surrounding Male, the capital.

5. Previous rural radio experiences in Nepal seem to indicate that the same approach might also be used there to great advantage. During a major drive in the 1970s to establish transmitters in the mountainous regions of the Kathmandu Valley, Unesco suggested the setting up of a medium power transmitter (medium wave) in Pokhara. The proposal followed the example of a community broadcasting centre similar to the Hill Tribes Station in Chiangmai, Thailand. This original proposal soon became unnecessary since an agreement was signed with the Japanese Government to provide complete broadcasting facilities in Kathmandu and Pokhara, with microwave relays to Pokhara and eventually to Surkhet and Biratnagar.

6. Early in 1983, interest in the Unesco proposal was revived but in a different form. Discussions between Unesco officers and representatives of Radio Nepal and the Nepal Government in December 1983 and October 1984 yielded the following proposals:

- A. The project could be organized under the auspices of Radio Nepal in liaison with concerned development agencies in the region. Radio Nepal would consider creating a unit for community broadcasting.
- B. It was suggested that an FM transmitter be set up in Surkhet, with eventual relays to the farther mountain valleys. In a second phase, another station would be considered, possibly to be sited in Dorti.
- C. The Ministry of Communication proposed a seminar in Kathmandu in 1984 to discuss the project with all the parties involved. A similar seminar was to take place in the proposed project site, Surkhet.
- D. The project was to comprise the following elements: FM transmission for a community station; design and construction of transmitter and antenna; assembly of transistor radios with FM and medium wave bands; experiments with solar power for both transmitter and radio sets.
- E. Emphasis was to be on programmes produced by villagers, development agencies and workers. (Once the microwave relay is functioning in this region, national news and top priority information programmes can also be relayed over the community station.)
- F. As required, secretariat or consultant missions would be fielded to assist Radio Nepal in the planning and implementation of the project.
- G. Funds would be sought from extra-budgetary sources in co-operation with the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). The total cost of the project was estimated at \$590,990 (including programme support costs) and its duration was set at three years.

7. Funds have now been pledged by the Federal Republic of Germany to cover project costs over the first two years for US \$480,000.

#### Mission objectives

8. This mission was undertaken within the context of the above proposal. The objectives were as follows:

- A. To study a suitable site in Nepal for a Community Radio Project;

- B. To set up a National Production Team with the concurrence of Radio Nepal, taking the Mahaweli Community Radio project as a model;
- C. To plan facilities for team members such as quarters, allowances, etc.;
- D. To test a ten watt, low cost transmitter;
- E. To finalize an equipment list;
- F. To decide on a revised calendar of project activities;
- G. To follow up the approval of the project and the signing of the Plan of Operation.

9. The mission consisted of four consultants: Mr. Martin Allard (U.K., broadcast engineer); Mr. Jayantha Mendis (radio technician from the Mahaweli Project, Sri Lanka); Mr. Dirk Schouten (Netherlands, community media specialist); and Mr. E. S. T. Fernando (Deputy Director General of S.L.B.C. and National Co-ordinator of the Mahaweli Community Radio). Each consultant wrote his own account of the mission, drawing his own conclusions. The present report combines and summarizes those conclusions.

10. The mission lasted for two weeks, 28 January - 11 February 1985, during which time the consultants held a series of discussions with representatives of the Ministry of Communications and Radio Nepal, subsequently visiting the proposed project site in the Surkhet Valley for an intensive study of conditions prevailing there. The mission was given the go-ahead to proceed with its work in anticipation of final approval of the project and signature of the Plan of Operation by the Government. Due to customs regulations, however, the ten watt test transmitter could not be cleared for use within the time span allotted for the consultants' work. As a result, the transmitter testing operation was not carried out.

11. As to final approval of the project, the official plan was agreed upon in principle during the consultants' stay in Nepal, although they were given to understand that the formal signature of the documents might take some time.

## II. FINDINGS

### Socio-economic background of the Surkhet Valley

12. There was unanimous agreement among the members of the mission and among the representatives of Radio Nepal and the Government Ministry of Communications that the Surkhet Valley, 680 km from Kathmandu, is an ideal site for a Community Radio Project.

13. First of all, it is a developing area in which the King of Nepal has taken a special interest in recent years. The valley is eight kilometres wide by nine kilometres long, and has a population of about 20,000, an excellent target audience for a community radio project. Nearly everyone in the Surkhet Valley depends on farming as a way of life. Infant mortality stands at about 50 per cent, and food shortages are not uncommon during the cold months.

14. Agriculture in the valley is limited to the cultivation of rice, maize and wheat, carried out by the resolute use of traditional methods such as buffalos and wooden ploughs. There is a very high percentage of illiteracy; probably as many as 70 per cent of the valley's people are unable to read or write. Irrigation as a means of increasing crop yields is not widely practised and this forces farmers to depend on seasonal rains to water their crops. Transportation is largely by bicycles and bullock carts, with a very limited bus service out of the valley, though the road south is impassable to vehicles from May to September. There is, however, an all-weather landing strip at Birendranagar, with a regular air link to Kathmandu.

15. Telecommunication with Kathmandu and the outside world is satisfactory, and includes a modern microwave link in Birendranagar, the regional capital, a perfect place for a local radio station. In this area there are plenty of people, plenty of problems, and little entertainment; yet Birendranagar and its surrounding district are not so inaccessible as to pose insurmountable difficulties in building a radio station.

16. There is a severe lack of information in the Sirkhet Valley. No national newspapers arrive here, and the three local ones are only printed monthly. Other reading matter is almost non-existent while reception of Radio Nepal is very poor because of the mountain ranges surrounding the valley. Although Indian Radio comes across rather more clearly, its language (Hindi) is not widely understood.

17. All in all, on the basis of previous experience in Sri Lanka and Homa Bay, Kenya, the Surkhet Valley community would seem to have all the basic characteristics that the community radio concept is specifically designed to handle. That is, community radio here can act as a catalyst to bring about gradual change for the better through a planned process of motivation and well-conceived programming.

#### The site

18. All four mission members further agreed that the Surkhet Valley site was ideal for a local station broadcasting with a ten watt, VHF-FM transmitter. The station transmitter and studio could be installed in Birendranagar, because the town is slightly above valley level and can saturate the whole area except for a shadow caused by the Kalimathi hill (2,400 feet). Birendranagar stands at 2,300 feet above sea-level and the valley level is 2,100 feet. Kalimathi hill is an ideal place for a solar-powered relay station, which will eventually prove essential because the shadowed areas contain some settlements and one larger village. A road leads to the top of the hill, which is crowned by a ruined temple. The mission was given to understand that the presence of the temple would not pose any obstacle to the installation of a solar-powered relay station. In a later stage of the project, a network of FM transmitters could be installed to cover other villages.

#### Installation of community radio: the station

19. The experiences in Homa Bay and Mahaweli provide ample guidelines on the establishment of community radio. The mission agreed:

- (i) that the process of setting up the station should be very gradual, as should be the on-site training of the staff. This is in order to give time for news of the station's existence to reach all inhabitants prior to the inaugural broadcast, thereby creating an atmosphere of interest and participation. The valley's three monthly newspapers should also be given ample time to publicize the station's arrival.
- (ii) As far as possible, construction material, furniture and materials should be locally made or supplied.

Basic needs

20. The basic needs for a station are as follows:

- (i) A quiet location, preferably off the main street in Birendranagar, as silence reduces the cost of sound insulation.
- (ii) In the first stages of the project, the radio building may be rented.

(iii) The building must be such as to provide space for:

- studio: 4 x 8 m	32 m <sup>2</sup>
- 2 editing rooms: 4 x 4 m	16 m <sup>2</sup>
- office for 4 producers: 4 x 4 m	16 m <sup>2</sup>
- office for field co-ordinator: 4 x 4 m	16 m <sup>2</sup>
- conference room: 4 x 6 m	24 m <sup>2</sup>
- storage accommodation: 4 x 4 m	16 m <sup>2</sup>
- secretariat and library: 4 x 4 m	16 m <sup>2</sup>
- toilet: 1 x 2 m	2 m <sup>2</sup>
- spare room: 4 x 4 m	16 m <sup>2</sup>
TOTAL (excluding corridors, etc.)	<hr/> 154 m <sup>2</sup>

21. Room sizes can of course vary according to the rented building's dispositions.

Studio

22. In community broadcasting, a studio is a secondary element, since the emphasis is primarily on field production. Most radio material is recorded live at the places where people live and work. Nonetheless, a rudimentary studio, perhaps even doubling as a conference room, is necessary for editing and some live transmissions. The following elements are required for both the studio and the other rooms in the station premises.

- tables
- chairs
- wallcarpets
- tablecloths
- floorcarpets
- curtains
- cupboards

23. All this furniture can be made in the Surkhet Valley.

24. In addition, two «silent» fans are needed, along with blackboard, chalk and adequate materials for acoustical insulation. The library should contain ready-made programmes on cassette, books on local and community radio, service manuals, etc. An eventual academic wing can be envisaged here. For secretarial work there should be at least two typewriters, one with 'qwerty' keyboard and one with Nepali. Obviously the secretarial offices should be installed as far away as possible from the studio.

#### Electronic equipment

25. A proposed list of mixing equipment, field recording equipment and studio production gear has been prepared for review. In general, it can be stated that production material can be supplied by development officers in the region under the guidance of the producers, in contrast to Sri Lanka, where the team itself is now able to take care of this aspect.

#### Radio receivers

26. There is some uncertainty as to how many receivers exist at present in the Surkhet Valley, since many are unlicensed. The project may provide some radio sets or components for local assembly in Surkhet. There is a radio repair shop on the main street of Birendranagar capable of handling most electronic work.

#### Personnel

27. The mission concluded that the following basic staff will be required for a community radio project in the Surkhet Valley:

- 1 field co-ordinator, stationed full-time in Birendranagar. This person must be fully accepted by the local community and possess a thorough knowledge of the valley and its inhabitants.
- 4 producers, selected by the co-ordinator. These will be radio producers whose function is to liaise with local people and agencies and act as catalysts for the making of radio programmes. They will also teach the others to produce programmes. They will be expected to work full-time in the valley.
- 2 technicians. Technicians are available in the Surkhet Valley and they will certainly be willing to work part-time for the station. Alternatively, Radio Nepal may assign one or both technicians.
- 1 secretary.

28. All of the above can be recruited through Radio Nepal, using their own personnel or other personnel of their choice.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

29. After meetings with:

- Radio Nepal
- Ministry of Communication
- World View International Foundation
- Officials in the Surkhet Valley (about 25)
- the Royal Press Secretary

the mission reached the following conclusions:

- A. Everybody concerned in these discussions, particularly and most importantly the local Surkhet Valley officials, appeared highly enthusiastic about the proposed Community Radio Project. The reaction was always refreshingly positive.
- B. The only major technical problem was perceived as the unstable electricity supply of the valley, which at best is only available for part of the day. However, this can be expected to improve shortly. Essential equipment should be run from a 12-volt lead-acid battery supply, float-charged from the mains, which would give several days of reserve power. Some experiments could be done with solar cells as back-up.
- C. There is no shortage of material for radio broadcasts in Surkhet. The place is beset by a number of socio-economic problems: high infant mortality, deforestation, poor irrigation, education, and health. The local officials responsible all immediately understood the part community radio could play in improving conditions, and all professed themselves eager to assist in the making of radio programmes to that end.

### IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

30. The project should have an overall directing authority: in this case, that authority could be the Director General of Radio Nepal, or a person he chooses to delegate.

31. The mission recommends that Radio Nepal should choose any personnel deemed necessary within the Nepal civil service. Some staff can also be recruited among university researchers or journalism graduates, if Radio Nepal wishes.

32. The plan of operation should be signed by the Government as soon as possible. Immediate activities should include the early appointment of the national team; the selection of a building site; ordering of radio equipment; and, if the Government deems it necessary, the provision by the project of at least 2,000 FM radio sets or electronic components for local assembly.

33. In conclusion, all four members of the Unesco mission wish to emphasize that in their view the Surkhet Valley offers an ideal setting for a Community Radio as envisaged in the Project Plan; and if the Project is well laid out and executed it is bound to prove successful.