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From the ground up

by **Sonia Randhawa**

MALAWI has one of the worst rates of maternal deaths in the world, with 984 women dying per 100,000 live births. In one region, 200 women's groups have come together to combat the problem and one of their key tools is community radio.

Unlike either private or government radio, community radio is owned and operated by communities themselves. They are non-profit, so they put people in the community first, rather than business or government. And in nations as diverse as Australia, Malawi, Thailand and India, they are playing a key role in providing a distinctive local voice in a sea of commercialised or corporatised mass media.

The achievements of the Malawi project are tangible. More women are seeking and getting protection from HIV and AIDS. Maternal health, and therefore child health, are both improving.

And there have been unexpected spin-offs, affecting both men and women in the communities – such as increased communication and better relations between health workers and people in the communities.

One of the reasons behind the success of the Malawi project has been that it has been bottom-up. Women were consulted, defined the priorities of the programme for themselves and were invested in both the project and its results. They produced the radio programmes, handled the

interviews and research. Experts were brought in at their request, they were asked questions by the women who were facing the problems being discussed – not by twice or

thrice removed journalists and experts. The project is sustainable only because of the involvement of these women and their groups.

This is at the heart of community radio ethos. That ownership and control by communities is vital – vital in the sense of necessary but also with the connotations of breathing life, vitality into the radio stations. The community ownership means that the stations are beholden to the communities in which they live, of which they are a part. This doesn't always make for comfortable radio – in Thailand the stations have often reflected the highly divisive and partisan politics that are dividing the country. It doesn't even always make for interesting radio – in Indonesia, there is a plethora of hobbyist radio, radio stations set up by individuals obsessed with their own hobby, and I can imagine nothing more dull. But it does mean that they reflect what drives and motivates the people in those communities. And sometimes the results are life-saving, life-changing and plain extraordinary. The healing power of radio in the aftermath of disasters, the power of radio to reconcile members of a community in the aftermath of violence, radio bringing hope to communities ravaged by famine and corruption. Examples of all these make the history of community radio both colourful and proud.

In many ways community radio is a bit like local government. It does its job best when those in control are those most affected by it – the local listeners in the case of community radio, the local residents and citizens in the case of

local government. Another similarity is that Malaysia is

one of the few countries in the region to have neither. Thailand has possibly the world's highest per capita number of community radio stations – with 6,000 registered. There are estimated to be at least 400 in Indonesia, a handful in the Philippines, and even stations in Cambodia and Laos (one apiece). Not all conform to the strict definition of community radio, but they all aspire to those ideals. Much as with local government elections.

So this year, once again, at the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC, from the French acronym) Asia-Pacific Regional Assembly, there was a resolution passed asking the Malaysian government to pass legislation enabling the setting up and operations of community radio stations. As with local government, it would help the government achieve its own rhetoric – encouraging the production of local media content, a diversity of material particularly in Bahasa Malaysia, a sense of civic duty and pride and possibly even work towards the vague goal of 1Malaysia.

Perhaps we'll get both before the next AMARC regional assembly, in four years time.

Sonia attended the AMARC regional assembly, thanks to her work with enabling communities to engage in "narrow-casting" and online podcasting through the Centre for Independent Journalism. Comments: letters@thesundaily.com



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