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**Neha Arya**  
Ph.D. Scholar, Department of  
Agricultural Communication,  
College of Agriculture,  
GBPUA&T, Pantnagar,  
Uttarakhand, India

**Kashyap SK**  
Professor, Department of  
Agricultural Communication,  
College of Agriculture,  
GBPUA&T, Pantnagar,  
Uttarakhand, India

## An assessment of the sustainability of community radio stations in India

**Neha Arya and Kashyap SK**

### Abstract

Community media help in community empowerment by fulfilling the community's informational needs and by encouraging the community members in participation of their own development. The community radio is a very important community media tool to address and overcome the different community related issues by empowering the community members. The sustainability of community radio depends on various social, organizational, technical and financial aspects of the community as well as of the community radio station. The functional aspect of community radio stations run by educational institution is different than those of run by non-governmental organizations. The present study consist of eight educational institution operated community radio stations (EI-CRSs) and eight by non-governmental organizations operated community radio stations (NGO-CRSs). In the present study, the investigator determined the sustainability of different CRSs by exploring the different indicators of community radio sustainability. For this purpose a sustainability index developed consisting six different indicators namely social equity, social cohesiveness, programming and feedback management, organizational and human resource management, technical management and financial management. The perception of both the community radio listeners and the community radio functionaries regarding these indicators were collected and analysed in the present study. The results shows a difference in the perception of both the respondent groups. Among all sustainability indicators, the community radio listeners perceived to have high level of organizational and human resource management (50.41%) whereas the community radio functionaries perceived to have high level social cohesiveness (56.25 %). The NGO-CRSs were equally distributed into moderately sustainable and least sustainable categories i.e. 37.50 percent community radio stations in each category. In case of educational institute operated community radio stations, half of the CRSs were moderately sustainable. Overall the community radio stations were categorized as moderately sustainable (43.75%), highly sustainable (31.25%) and least sustainable (25%) community radio stations.

**Keywords:** community radio sustainability, social sustainability, institutional sustainability, financial sustainability

### Introduction

Community radio is about the horizontal exchange of information, a participatory interaction between the community and the radio station rather than a vertical, one-way communication method, delivering information from a medium to the public. The most important aspects of community radio is that the community participants emphasized, often on a volunteer basis. Community radio involves community organization, joint thinking and decision-making, all of which entail great potential for empowering communities and building a democratic society. Community radio is "one that is operated in the community, for the community, about the community and by the community" (Tabing, 2002) [10]. Community radio is regarded as third tier of broadcasting service after public and commercial broadcasting services and it emphasizes to bring small communities together to realize their potential and encourages local aspirations. Community radio as an ICT tool now playing a major role in disseminating information to communities in remote and rural areas as it is cost-wise pro-poor and enable greater community participation.

The emergence of community radio stations in the country has been driven by an organized effort at building collective identity among vigilant citizens across the country as a grassroots culture, embracing alternative organizational practices (Singh, 2010).. Community radio is a catalyst of positive social change in rural parts of India, which speaks volumes about its potential as a change agent (Barl, 2009) [1]. Community radio uses the local language and dialects in its content broadcasted, which provides a sense of belongingness to the local people and eliminates the illiteracy constraints in rural areas.

**Corresponding Author**  
**Neha Arya**  
Ph.D. Scholar, Department of  
Agricultural Communication,  
College of Agriculture,  
GBPUA&T, Pantnagar,  
Uttarakhand, India

Das (2011)<sup>[3]</sup> believed that in a pluralistic society, like India, the community radio encourages the specific community's social, cultural and political identity by operating with the community and for the community's welfare. The highest impact which can be obtained through the community radio broadcasting is an awareness and understanding of problems and encouraging possible stimulation and motivation to take action against it. It's a techno-based audio medium where important local issues are broadcasted with the local people's ideas and opinion.

In India, the Community radio works under the supervision of the government with declared norms, ethics and context. Any non-profit organizations like NGOs, educational institutions and KVKs can apply for license to establish community radio station. Community participation in community radio stations varies from total ownership to different degrees of audience involvement in programming and management. The CRS has its root in the community as the community members are responsible for developing more than fifty percent of the content broadcasted by the CRS. The board of management consists community members which represents the community in ownership and management of the community radio station. The programme development and broadcasting is done with participative mode by both community and community radio functionaries.

The sustainability of community radio station is very much discussed topic among the scholars but still there is so much to understand about the concept of community radio sustainability. The issue of long run of community radios is much more complex than it is viewed by the policy makers. There is no doubt that financial stability is very important for any organization's long run capability but in case of community radios equating the sustainability with the financial performance of the community radios confuses it's core objective of being a non-profit organization. But this notion can also be viewed as correct under certain situations as presented by Nair (2011)<sup>[5]</sup> that the question of sustainability came up because many community radio stations had been set up through the grants by donors with the initial thought that the communities would not be able to manage the stations once the support was withdrawn. Observing only the financial performance and future of financial avenues for the community radio station is not going to give an in-depth understanding of community radio sustainability. As revealed by Dagrón (2001)<sup>[2]</sup> there are three dimensions of sustainability which determine the ability of community radio stations to survive and grow. The first was '*social sustainability*' (community ownership of the station and participation in production and airing of programmes at both decision-making and operational levels). The second was '*institutional sustainability*', (the ways the broadcasters function: station policies, democratic processes, management styles, internal relationships and practices, and partnerships with external agencies) and the third was '*financial sustainability*', (station's model for generating revenue and how its funds were managed and accounted for). He also believed that social and institutional sustainability were the foundation on which financial sustainability was built. Whereas Rao (2000)<sup>[6]</sup> categorized sustainability factors in to four components *viz.*; organizational factors, legal factors, financial factors and technical factors. The inclusion of all these factors gives a better picture of community radio sustainability. The review of different studies on community radio sustainability gives an idea about different factors

involved in facilitating the sustainability in long run. For instance, Ideosync (2015)<sup>[4]</sup> studied financial sustainability (infrastructural stability and financial resources and management), social sustainability (volunteer practices, local partnership, community involvement, gender equality and accountability) and institutional sustainability (vision and mission content analysis, capacity building, gender parity and good practices). Combing all of these factors gives a more holistic approach for assessment of community radio sustainability.

To observe the community radio sustainability, the understanding of overall functional aspects of community radios is very essential. There are some strong indicators of community radio sustainability which can not be overlooked and are necessary to be addressed with attention. UNESCO (2001)<sup>[9]</sup> as part of its Media Development Project identified four decisive factors to minimize vulnerability and to ensure sustainable functioning of CR Stations. These factors were based on the challenges and obstacles identified (that included stations being off air due to lack of proper technical configurations, inadequately trained staff etc). These four decisive factors were as follows:

- a) A strong community ownership
- b) Effective training and capacitation
- c) A technical sustainability system
- d) Looking to the Future in Anxious Expectation

### Research methodology

The study was conducted in the north Indian states and union territories. North India comprises of seven states namely Himanchal Pradesh, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand and two union territories, Delhi and Chandigarh. There are total 66 operational community radio station in northern region of the country, out of which 44 stations govern by different educational institutes, 21 govern by different NGOs and one CR govern by KVK. Twenty five percent of the community radio stations were selected for the present study by employing stratified sampling method, thus by making a sample of 16 community radio stations from north India. Eight community radio stations from each strata i.e. NGO operated community radio stations (NGO-CRSs) and educational institution operated community radio stations (EI-CRSs) were selected randomly. Fifteen community radio listeners were randomly selected from each community radio station thus making a sample of 240 listeners. The responses of 240 community radio listeners and 16 community radio staff were collected.

### Sustainability Index

In the present study, sustainability is conceptualized as the perception of the community radio listeners and community radio staff about the social, institutional, programming, technical and financial aspects of community radio functioning.

To measure the sustainability level of the sampled community radio stations, an attempt was made to develop a sustainability index by considering various dimensions of social, programming, organizational, technical and financial management of community radio stations. This index consisted of six indicators; social equity, social cohesiveness, programming and feedback management, organizational and human resource management, technical management and financial management. A brief understanding of the

sustainability index prepared by the investigator is presented below by defining each indicator to understand the assessment of community radio sustainability in the present study:

- 1. Social equity:** In the present study, social equity is defined as the degree of fairness of treatment provided by community radio station to all members of the community irrespective of their age, gender and caste.
- 2. Social cohesiveness:** Social cohesiveness is operationalised as the level of understanding and integration between community and radio station, their interdependency and suitability of approach of the station towards the community.
- 3. Programming and feedback management:** It is the ability of the CR station to design and develop the radio programmes by involving community members and collect the feedback from the listeners and incorporate them for future use.
- 4. Organizational and human resource management:** It is defined as the ability of the community radio station to perform different task on daily basis by managing it's human resources and providing training on different aspects for improving their existing skills and upgrading new skills.
- 5. Technical management:** Technical management is operationalised as the ability of the CR station to acquire, maintain and upkeep the technical equipments and technical skills of the CR station staff and volunteers.
- 6. Financial management:** Financial management referred to the fund raising strategy of the station from different sources and maintaining the availability of the funds throughout the year.

After measuring all indicator of sustainability, weights were assigned to each indicator using principle component analysis (PCA). Then sustainability of each community radio station was calculated by using the following formula:-

$$VI_j = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n W_i NV_{ij}}{\sum_{i=1}^n W_i}$$

Where,

VI<sub>j</sub>= sustainability index of j community radio station

NV<sub>ij</sub>= normalized value of ith indicator for jth community radio station

SW<sub>i</sub> = summated value of weightage of all i indicators  
n = no. of indicators (here, it ranges from 1 to 6)

Based on the final calculation of sustainability index, the community radio stations are categorized as highly sustainable, moderately sustainable and least sustainable. Here, sustainability ranges from 0 to 1. Higher value of sustainability index indicates lower sustainability and lower value of sustainability index indicates higher sustainability.

### Sustainability of community radio stations

In the present study, sustainability indicators were discussed with two different sample groups including community radio listeners and community radio functionaries to understand the sustainability from the point of view of both the ends. Sustainability of community radio stations as perceived by the community radio listeners and functionaries are summarized in Table 1 and 2.

#### (a). Sustainability of community radio stations as perceived by community radio listeners

The data of community radio listeners in Table 1 shows that a large share of community radio listeners perceived that their community radio stations had high level of social cohesiveness (41.25%) and organizational and human resource management (50.41%). There has been increase in mutual understanding and interdependence between the community and community radio stations, as reported by the respondents. It was also observed during the study that community members are dependent on community radio stations mainly for entertainment purpose and to acquire information regarding various issues pertaining in their life while the community radio stations are dependent on community mainly for activities related to community radio programme production. The volunteers from the community indicated that the community radios are successful in maintaining frequent contact with them. These volunteers help the community radio staff in content generation and programming process of community radio programmes. The listeners also participated in different meeting organized by the community radios regarding the operational aspect of community radio station.

**Table 1:** Sustainability of community radio stations as perceived by community radio listeners (N=240)

Sustainability indicator	Percentage (%)		
	Low	Medium	High
Social Equity	22.50	44.17	33.33
Social cohesiveness	18.33	40.42	41.25
Programming and feedback management	23.33	39.59	37.08
Organizational and human resource management	17.92	31.67	50.41
Technical management	22.50	42.50	35.00
Financial management	35.83	33.75	30.42

According to the perception of community radio listeners, the studied community radio stations had medium level of social equity (44.17%), programming and feedback management (39.59%) and technical management (42.50%). Discussion with respondents also revealed that the understanding between the different sections of the community belonging to different socio-economic background had been increased since the inception of community radio station in their community. The community members felt at ease in opening

up and discussing their issues with other community members. Now the community radio stations is providing an open platform for the local talents/artists. Most of the community members expressed that they feel very good when their programmes were broadcasted over community radio and heard by other community members. This gives them a sense having an identity and also boost up their confidence. A major section of the community was willingly participating in different CR programmes showcasing their talents so that they

can be recognized and appreciated by others. While other community members reported that they feel very connected to community radio programmes as they hear the voice of their known people. The content in local dialect was the most appreciated feature of the community radio programmes by the respondents.

Among all the indicators of sustainability, financial management of community radio stations was reported to be low by the community radio listeners (35.83%). Most of the volunteers work with community radios on un-paid basis. The community members of some of the NGO-CRSs expressed that in the past they have contributed little sum of money to the CRS functionalities in form of donation while the EI-CRSs collect money from its members especially from the students of the institution in form of fee for different courses offered on air.

**(b). Sustainability of community radio stations as perceived by community radio functionalities**

After analyzing the responses of community radio functionalities it was found that their community radio had high level social equity i.e. 43.75 percent and social cohesiveness i.e. 56.25 percent. This indicates that according to community radio functionalities their station performed best in facilitating the social sustainability aspect of the community radio station. The community radio functionalities expressed that they continuously try to reduce the gap between the different social economical groups by involving them in community radio functioning. They also revealed that most of the members of higher socio economical group first hesitated to work with the members of lower socio economical group but after some time they felt comfortable with them. This has led to an understanding between the both sections of the community. The stations reported to have large numbers of volunteers who were willing to associate in different activities of the station. The community radio functionalities revealed that initially the community members were afraid of sharing information with them but now they freely express their feelings about various aspects of their life with community radio functionalities. With time the trust of community member on community radio stations has been increased and so their expectations from them. Now they demand specific information from community radio functionalities from time to time

As perceived by the CRS functionalities half of the community radio stations under study reported to have medium programming and feedback management, organizational and human resource management and financial management. The community radio functionalities expressed that the community members enjoyed their time while producing different programmes. The community members also contribute by giving some ideas for the programmes and helping in content creation and collection from other community members. The community radio stations had well maintained record for their human resources both paid and unpaid. The community radio stations also provided skill oriented training to their

community members from time to time. Some of the stations were unable to arrange these training for their functionalities and community due to lack of financial resources. Financial management was the major concern of all the community radio stations. Some of the community radio functionalities reported to have difficulty in acquiring the fund for smooth functioning of community radio station. The NGO-CRSs had more diversity in their financial resources than EI-CRSs as parent organization was the main financial support for the EI-CRSs. In case of NGO-CRSs, some of these community radios were functioning on their own without the financial support from their parent organization, therefore posing the financial constraints in their functioning. While EI-CRSs reported to face a lot of paper work to arrange for the funds from their parent organization. The financial management of community radio stations observed in the present study is similar to that of Santhini (2018) [7] who reported that the campus operated CR stations financial sustainability were ensured by their parent organisation whereas the NGO attempted to source it through projects and advertisements.

**Table 2:** Sustainability of community radio stations as perceived by community radio functionalities (N=16)

Sustainability indicator	Percentage (%)		
	Low	Medium	High
1. Social Equity	18.75	37.50	43.75
2. Social cohesiveness	18.75	25.00	56.25
3. Programming and feedback management	31.25	50.00	18.75
4. Organizational and human resource management	18.75	50.00	31.25
5. Technical management	37.50	37.50	25.00
6. Financial management	31.25	50.00	18.75

While an equal percentage of community radio functionalities perceived to have low and medium level of technical management i. e. 37.50 percent in each category. Technical management reported to be the major concern of both the NGO-CRSs and EI-CRSs respondents as it hinders the smooth broadcasting of the community radio programmes. The community radio stations having technical support from the community members were very relieved in technical matters as they had quick access to the technical services.

**Overall sustainability of the community radio stations**

After analysis, the studied sixteen community radio stations were categorized into different categories of sustainability based on their sustainability index score. It is evident that from Table 3 that there was equal distribution of non-governmental organization operated community radio stations into moderately sustainable and least sustainable categories i.e. 37.50 percent community radio stations in each category. While only twenty five percent of NGO-CRSs were found to be highly sustainable. In case of educational institute operated community radio stations, half of the CRSs were moderately sustainable followed by highly sustainable (37.50%) and least sustainable (12.50%).

**Table 3:** Distribution of community radio stations on the basis of sustainability (n= 16)

S. No.	Sustainability of community radio stations	NGO-CRSs		EI-CRSs		Total	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
1.	Highly sustainable (Less than 0.57)	2	25.00	3	37.50	5	31.25
2.	Moderately sustainable (0.57-0.78)	3	37.50	4	50.00	7	43.75
3.	Least sustainable (more than 0.78)	3	37.50	1	12.50	4	25.00
	Total	8	100.00	8	100.00	16	100.00



Similar to the EI-CRSs, the overall sustainability was found in the same order of categories i.e. moderately sustainable (43.75%), highly sustainable (31.25%) and least sustainable (25%) community radio stations.

The sampled community radio stations for the present study had a diverse socio-economic and cultural background. The organizational structure and working environment were also different from each other. It was also observed during the study that the social aspects of community radio sustainability (social equity and social cohesiveness) and programming aspects were greatly influenced by the diverse social, economic, psychological and communication characteristics of targeted communities. While the technical and financial aspects were influenced by the parent organization's involvement and support and it also affected the programming process of community radios. The respondents supported the independent functioning of community radio stations in case of NGO-CRSs whereas the educational institute supported community radios were reluctant in matter of withdrawal of their parent organizations from the community radio functioning. The strong community support was the key feature of the NGO-CRSs while the strong technical and financial backup was the key feature of EI-CRSs sustainability.

### Conclusion

Functioning of community radio stations is sustainable if it facilitates the development of the marginalized sections of communities. The themes of different community radio programmes should revolve around the informational need of these unprivileged masses. It is also necessary to create widespread awareness regarding the role and importance of community media in uplifting the poor and marginalized sections of the society. The present study stresses that the concept of community radio sustainability should be visualized from a multidirectional point of view including different functional aspects such as social, organizational, programming, technical and financial. There are other factors contributing to the community radio sustainability which still need to be identified in further studies. The finding of the present study reveal that the community radios can achieve sustainability if all the functional factors are addressed with focus and dedication. Achieving only social sustainability or programming sustainability or technical sustainability or financial sustainability is not enough for achieving the overall community radio sustainability in long run instead all these need to be realized together in a balance. The findings of the present study indicate that there are some differences between the sustainability of community radios as perceived by the listeners and by the community radio functionaries. In some of the sustainability indicators such as social equity, organizational and human resource management and financial management, the study indicate different perception of community radio listeners and community radio functionaries. Whereas other indicators such as social cohesiveness, programming and feedback management and technical management were perceived similarly by both community radio listeners and community radio functionaries. Among the sixteen community radio stations, about one third identified themselves as highly sustainable whereas one forth categorized themselves as least sustainable which indicates an average performance of community radio stations in the present. The functioning of community radios is different from other organizations as they have very specific objectives

and very specific clientele to be focussed on. It simplifies their thematic area (very clear objectives and guidelines) but also complexes their practical area (very target oriented and effective methods for a diverse clientele base of communities having different socio-economic profile). The functioning community radio stations require rigid as well as flexible approach to obtain their objective of developing the most poor and marginalized masses. This inevitably calls for a balance between the rigid approach and flexible approach of community radio functioning. The present study supports that understanding the indicators of community radio sustainability will facilitate the development of such balanced approach for community radios on one hand and strengthen the partnership between the community members and community radio functionaries on the other hand. The study also implies that all functional aspects of community radio stations should be looked with much more attention and focus to create a balance among them for the long run of community radios.

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