

**Joint submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh by the Bangladesh
NGOs Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC) and Free Press Unlimited**
For consideration at the 30th Session of the Working Group in May 2017

The submitting organisations welcome the opportunity to contribute to the third cycle of the UPR of Bangladesh. This submission focuses on issues relating to freedom of expression in Bangladesh and in particular the role community media play to promote the freedom of expression of the people of Bangladesh, as this is our area of expertise.

64 percent of the 160 million inhabitants of Bangladesh live in rural areas. The information needs of this vast population is served by a relatively small array of private and community media, attempting to bring an alternative to the large influence and penetration of the state television and radio. Many people in rural areas cannot afford a television set or don't have a reliable supply of electricity. The reach of newspapers outside of urban centres is limited by low literacy rates in rural areas. Community radios are some of the few relatively independently operating media outlets outside of urban centres, and enjoy a certain degree of media freedom. In Bangladesh Community Radio is an effective tool for achieving plurality in the media, particularly by ensuring participation of the marginalized sections of the society in the media and addressing information poverty. As community radios are often the only sources of information in remote and rural areas they play an important role as it increases the access of communities (including marginalized groups) to information concerning their daily needs, knowledge, social services and facilitates direct dialogue with local elected authorities.

In 2017 media in Bangladesh were increasingly faced with law suits, fines, arrests, harassment and police violence. Particularly draconian is section 57 of the ICT Law, which carries a minimum sentence of 7 years imprisonment and authorizes police violence for defamation and empowers authorities to prosecute people "in the interest of sovereignty, integrity or security of Bangladesh" or if they are deemed to "prejudice the image of the State" or "hurt religious belief". This seriously clashes with international standards of freedom of expression.

Positive developments in 2017 have been the indication by the government and Ministry of Information of their willingness to push for the creation of a national fund for community radio, which will be an important step towards sustainability. The authorities are also increasingly encouraging proliferation of media and information literacy programs, including campaigns.

**The development of Community Radio in Bangladesh and its importance in promoting
the human rights of the people of Bangladesh**

Overall, Community Radio has grown in Bangladesh due to increased recognition of its importance in development and democracy in the rural parts of Bangladesh. Community radio now plays an important role in the empowerment of the marginalized and low income rural population and in advancing the localization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in rural Bangladesh. Community radio in Bangladesh has a proven track record in prevention of child marriages, providing alternative education to children unable to attend school, improving maternal health, empowering women in different areas, and contributing to poverty reduction.

In 2008 the Ministry of Information of the Government of Bangladesh declared the *Community Radio Installation, Broadcast and Operation Policy 2008*, which was the culmination of a process to set up community radio that started in 1998. Accordingly, in April 2010, the Ministry of Information approved 32 Community Radio Stations to operate for the first time in the country. After the approval of licenses Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has allocated 5 frequencies and from 2011 the Community Radio stations started broadcasting in line with National Frequency Allocation Plan. Now 17 Community Radio Stations are on-air in the country, aiming to ensure the empowerment and the right to information of the rural community. They are broadcasting altogether 135 hours of programming per day on information, education, local entertainment and development activities. Around 100 young women & youth are working as rural broadcasters at these stations throughout the country. Another 15 Community Radio stations will start broadcasting by the end of 2017.

Democratizing the usage of airwaves, Community Radio provides citizens a platform for exercising their right to freedom of expression and securing easy access to media. Airwaves are a public resource and community broadcasting in Bangladesh is an important use of this resource, particularly in the light of progress towards the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals, including target 16.10 on public access to information and fundamental freedoms. Community Radio has created scope for the poor and marginalized community to raise their own voice; it has become the voice for the voiceless. It thereby opened scope to establish their rights of information and communication in social, political, cultural and environmental matters and as a result it contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable development. Community radio provides a platform for dialogue between local elected representatives and citizens, government and NGO professionals for the sake of establishing good governance. Furthermore, it creates a platform for social debate, inclusion and preservation of cultural diversity by ensuring the inclusion of marginalized communities.

Another important role Community Radio increasingly plays in Bangladesh is in Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) by establishing effective linkages between the government departments and local/rural communities during disasters. Floods are a major issue in Bangladesh, each year in Bangladesh about 18% of the country is flooded, so this is of incredible value.

The Community Media Sector has flourished and developed its role positively since 2011. For this to continue it will be necessary to overcome the remaining challenges in the coming period. Community broadcasters are currently not able to use advertising and to receive sponsorships which highly limits their ability to be financially independent and sustainable. Another challenge is the lack of media and information literacy among the population of Bangladesh; the demand for quality information and the use of existing mechanisms for access to information by journalists and the general public to promote transparency and accountability are precariously low.

To be effective actors for change, community media rely on an environment in which a free and vibrant civil society sector can flourish, including groups which promote and support community media in rural Bangladesh.

BNNRC and FPU

BNNRC is the umbrella body of the community media sector to promote community media to the Government, Industry, Regulatory Bodies, Media and Development Partners in Bangladesh. BNNRC actively works to improve recognition of the community electronic media sector

[Community Radio, Community TV, Community Film] and from 2000 it works for involvement of the communities it seeks to serve with support from Free Press Unlimited in the Netherlands.

Recommendations

We call on UN Member States to make the following recommendations to the government of Bangladesh. These recommendations are targeted particularly at community broadcasting, and are based on an understanding that to foster a strong and effective community broadcast sector in Bangladesh, which is recognized as being an essential part of a free, pluralistic and independent media landscape the following actions are necessary:

- Allow community broadcasters to access funding from a diverse range of sources of funding, including advertising and sponsorship, on an equitable basis with other broadcasters.
- Put in place financial support measures (such as transmission fee subsidies or special tariffs for non-profits), while respecting the operational and editorial independence of community media.
- Promote and support media and information literacy which empowers citizens to engage fully with all communications, including community broadcasting.
- Ensure that licensing is done by an independent regulatory body which has expertise, understanding and the mandate to support and promote community broadcasting.
- Take measures to ensure the security and safety of community broadcast outlets and broadcasters, and in particular women broadcasters.