

## Community Radios and Access to Information in Local Government Authorities in Tanzania

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### Abstract:

One of the challenges facing local government authorities in rural Tanzania is how to disseminate information to the citizens and obtain timely feedback. Decentralization which brings government close to the people was thought to increase information flow but empirical evidence proves otherwise. This paper sought investigated the contribution of emerging community radios in bridging information asymmetry in local government authorities. Data were collected through questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews. Results indicate that despite its popularity and coverage, very little information is disseminated through community radios due to lack of policy at LGAs level as well as conflicting national policies which still favor the center at the expense of local community approaches.

**Key words:** Access to information, community radios, local government authorities

### Introduction:

One of the challenges facing Tanzania's decentralized local government authorities (LGAs) is information flow from the leaders to the people and vice versa (Mushi and Melyoki, 2005). Increased access to information is vital in enabling local dialogue and debates, which leads to community consciousness (Fraser and Estrada, 2001). At first it was thought decentralization exercise would bring government closer to people hence information would easily flow from the leadership to the people through official channels such as participatory planning, notice board posting and publishing in print media. Also, supplementary channels such as interpersonal

communication, mass media, and informal networks were expected to play an important role in facilitating information flow (Mrutu, 2003; Ng'wanakilala, 1981).

However, emerging evidence indicates that there is a weakness in both the official and supplementary means of information flow in decentralized LGAs in Tanzania (Mmari and Katera, 2018, Makongo and Rakesh, 2003). Many of the rural dwellers for example, cannot read and write; hence do not read notice board posting (Mushi and Melyoki 2005). Participatory planning has also not managed to supply all the information needed by people because of weak machinery to

get people involved in all LGAs issues (Cooksey and Kikula, 2005). That means citizenry do not access proper and timely information, which would lead to community consciousness and hence enhance LGAs accountability (Fraser and Estrada, 2001; DFID, 2001; Boafo, 2000).

In the above context, especially after the liberalization of radio waves in 1990s, Tanzania has witnessed growth of community radios located in rural areas. Community radios are a form of radio broadcasting not for profit making, owned and controlled by a particular community under an association, trust or foundation (Alumuku, 2006). Usually, they are small independent radio stations run on modest budget, which give priority to local communities, religious groups and ethnic minorities (Peterson, 2004). Community radio stations are accountable to the community they represent; they enhance the community's capacity to dialogue, debate and exchange ideas on various developmental issues (TCRA, 2007).

This study, therefore aims at assessing whether the emergence of community radios has bridged information asymmetry between LGAs leadership and citizens in two selected LGAs of Sengerema in Mwanza region on the shores of Lake Victoria and Simanjiro LGA in Manyara region in Northern Tanzania. Specifically, the paper addressed two research questions:

1. What are the contributions of community radios in information flow from LGAs to the citizens?
2. Does the existence of community radio enhanced dialogue between people and LGAs leaders?

### **Materials and methods:**

The study was conducted in two LGAs; Sengerema (Mwanza region) and Simanjiro (Manyara region). Both districts were purposely selected because they have well organized community radio stations which are over five years old. Questionnaire survey and focus group discussion were used to collect relevant data. A total of 1,000 questionnaires were administered whereby 995 (99%) were collected and found

suitable for analysis. The sample (995 respondents) comprised of 61% male and 38% female.

### **Results and discussions:**

#### **Community radio and information flow from LGAs to the citizens:**

In order to find out the contribution of community radios on information flow from LGAs to the citizens, respondents were asked whether they heard selected set of information from LGAs namely budget, taxes collected in respective areas, expenditures, financial allocation on key sectors such as education and health, and how to report corrupt official. These types of information are considered important and in fact constitute major sharing between LGA and citizens; and LGA and higher levels of government in Tanzania.

Results show that on average, only 20% of respondents admitted to hear such information broadcast on community radio and 80% didn't hear at all. These findings are surprising because LGAs are largest institutions in rural areas and presumably largest news maker in the locality, yet less than half of respondents heard nothing concerning major issues at LGAs through community radios.

To corroborate the above findings, an analysis of community radios news bulletin was done to determine proportion of time spent for LGAs news in community radios. News bulleting covering a period of three months were purposely selected and analyzed. The three-month span was chosen because both radio stations destroy news reports after elapse of such period. The aim of the analysis was to find out extent to which community radio covers local events and local government in particular. A total of 863 news bulletins were obtained for analysis. Results reveal that 35% of time was spent on international news, followed by national news 30%, regional 25% and local news constituted 11%. These findings indicate that local issues are barely given importance in community radios. The findings are surprising because the aim of community radio is to keep citizens informed of events in their

locality (including of course LGAs issues), yet its news bulletin focuses on national and international issues which are well covered by other mass media. Neglecting local news in favor of international issues also contradicts a popular journalistic view of news which assumes that news is what is happening close to home (Caramazza, 2002).

In-depth interviews revealed that absence of local items is contributed by failure of LGAs to cooperate with Community radios when it comes to disseminating information. One worker at Sengerema community radio said: 'whenever there is hot issue to report, everyone at the district council would say he/she is not the spokesperson.' This puts off volunteer journalists. Discussions among media practitioners showed that reluctant to giving out information in LGAs is also caused by lack of media policy which would guide information to disseminate notwithstanding section 67 (2) of the Local Government Act of 1982 which provide meetings of the LGAs are open to the public and the press. However, observations in the two districts show that there are no specific procedures on how to implement the section. The decision to invite press in is left with the convener of the meeting and there is no way one can query if media are not informed of the meeting.

Also, poor cooperation of LGAs officials when it comes to information dissemination through community radios is attributed to existence of some prohibitive laws such as provisions of the Access to Information Act (2016) which sets out a variety of offences, including distortion of information (penalty of imprisonment of between two and five years. Also, Broadcasting Services (Content) Regulations, 2005), and Statistics Act, 2015 and (Miscellaneous Amendments No.3) Act, 2018 which stipulate that data released publicly to be first approved by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and prescribes fines, imprisonment, or both for anyone who disputes official government figures, harming academic freedom. The law was amended in 2019 to remove criminal liability for publishing independent data.

Further, sections 7 and 15 of the 1997 Regional Administrative Act allows regional and district commissioners to arrest and detain any person deemed threatens public order for 24 hours and 48 hours without any charge. The definition of public order could be translated of anything that is not in favor of a particular commissioner and this law has been abused in successive regimes where journalists, activists, and civil servants found themselves either threatened or detained for all sorts of minor misunderstandings.

These, and other prohibitive regulations on information, data and broadcasting make LGA officials wary of divulging information to the community radio stations. As a result, interviewed LGAs officials indicated that government information is treated as a sensitive issue which may land someone in trouble if not handled with care. To avoid perceived trouble many officials just pass the responsibility of divulging information to their superiors.

Further, focus group discussions held that the inflexibility of LGAs in utilizing emerging information channels could be explained by existence of bureaucracy and lack of autonomy despite the much talked about decentralization by devolution in government circles. Mpehongwa (2005) posit that LGAs are squeezed in strict bureaucracy and are closely monitored by central and provisional governments. This puts greater demands on LGA leadership to comply with higher authorities leaving citizens, who are supposedly owners of LGAs as spectators. Shivji, *et al* (2005) correctly argued that most of the laws view citizens as servant instead of masters of the state.

Kilimwiko (2002); Hakielimu and LHRC (2006) have noted that existence of laws impeding free flow of information contradicts the spirit of freedom of the press and good governance championed by the constitutions of Tanzania. It undermines the whole concept of establishing LGAs which is to give power to the people, which include smooth flow of information. Community radios do not operate in vacuum; its performance is very much affected by existing laws and socio-

economic situation of a given society (Kilimwiko, 2002). It is therefore imperative to understand that absence of supportive environment local level determine performance of community radios. AMARC (2007) and Alumuku (2006) have noted that community radios are more successful in areas with relatively supportive policy environment such as Ghana and South Africa.

Other reasons impeding proper usage of community radios to disseminate information from LGAs, according to community radio management and journalists, include lack of human and material resources facing community radios; they thus resort to cheaper means of collecting news such as the internet<sup>1</sup> which has readymade stories mainly from online newspapers. Observations in Sengerema community radio for instance, show that the station which broadcasts for 18 hours a day has only 12 journalists cum presenters to keep it on air. To compound the matter, the community radio has no means of transport to take them to remote villages to collect information.

However, inability to bridge information asymmetry between LGAs and citizens should not be interpreted as failure of community radios to enhance general information flow in Simanjiro and Sengerema districts. This is due to the fact that a considerable percentage of respondents believe community radios are important and ranked them their number one source of information. For example, respondents were asked whether community radio stations have enhanced general information flow. Results show that 68% of respondents agreed that community radio has managed to furnish them with wide-ranging information followed distantly by 19% who were not sure and 13% who said it has not enhanced the flow. This shows that citizens perceive community radios as one of the important sources of information in the localities.

Also, 90% of the respondents said that community radios were more effective than notice boards (a major means through which LGA officials

disseminate information), 7% were not sure and only 3% said notice board is more effective. These findings indicate that while LGAs continue to use notice boards as an important information dissemination method, the intended users (people) see it as ineffective means of disseminating information and are migrating to community radios. These results contradict Mboho (2005) who found that interpersonal communication plays a bigger role in information flow than modern mass media (community radio included) in rural Nigeria. This could be due to the fact that Mboho's case was a very small area which had relatively well-developed traditional means of information dissemination through traditional chiefs as compared to Tanzania where such systems have been replaced by local government authorities.

### **Community radio and dialogue between citizens and LGAs leaders:**

Community participation is a function of debates and dialogue (Figueroa, *et al*, 2002; Freire, (1970). There can be no genuine participation without proper and timely information with the ability to stir up dialogue (Mwakyembe, 2000). In order to find out whether existence of community radio has enhanced dialogue between LGAs leaders and the people, we asked respondents to state their assessment. Results show that 52% of the respondents agreed that existence of community radio has enhanced dialogue, 31% said they were not sure while 17% said it made no difference. Jallo and Lwanga-Ntale (2007) reported similar results. She quoted a woman in Terrat in Simanjiro district as saying:

*"In the past there was no opportunity to raise concerns. Simply being a Maasai caused some people to switch off; because none imagined that a Maasai had anything to say. Now that we have our own radio, we shall continue talking..... day in day out, until someone listens"* (Jallo and Lwanga-Ntale (2007:18)

Another elder in Sukuro Village in Simanjiro was quoted as saying:

<sup>1</sup> Despite being in rural areas, both community radios had functional internet service

“.....we can hear ourselves”. “Yes, hearing ourselves is important. It means that first we are able to talk to one another... Secondly, after we have talked and heard our voices on radio, we also know that other people have heard what we are saying. This enhances our image as a people” (Jallov and Lwanga-Ntale, 2007:16)

The modest level of affirmative response on whether community radios enhanced dialogue indicate that it has not yet become a medium of interaction between people and their leadership at local level. This is because it is not yet used to channel important information that would stimulate community responses, hence dialogue. Further, it shows that emancipation promise offered by theorist such as McQuil (2005) has not yet taken root in Tanzania.

### Conclusion:

This study concludes that despite its popularity with local audience, community radios in Simanjiro and Sengerema LGAs of Tanzania have not yet been able to bridge information asymmetry between LGAs and citizens. This is caused by lack of clear media policy in LGAs; existence of bad laws impeding free flow of information in Tanzania and inadequate human and material resource within community radios necessary for effective coverage of local issues. Further, it indicates that the potential of community radios is not yet tapped to address information asymmetry in rural Tanzania.

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