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Community Radio Stations and Peacebuilding in The Far-North Region of Cameroon

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Abstract

The advent of community radio stations has considerably changed the habits of the local population, who now have direct access to information, but above all information that is local and specific to their reality. In conflict zones such as the Far North Region of Cameroon, on the borders with Nigeria and Chad, these radio stations are more than ever part of the drive to promote peace and coexistence, given the difficulties people face in living together. The large influx of migrants due to the security and environmental situations in the Lake Chad Basin region has brought home the importance of community radios in providing reliable, pragmatic information that promotes peace at the community level. Nevertheless, the burden that community radio stations have to carry is undoubtedly too heavy given the realities on the ground. This article sets out to identify the challenges faced by community radio stations operating in areas where the socio-economic and security situation is difficult. The theories used in this article are: interactionism (as developed by the Chicago school) and two-step-flow (as developed by Lazarsfeld and Katz). The fieldwork was carried out in the Far-North region of Cameroon, specifically in the Mayo-Tsanaga and Diamaré Divisions. Data collection was made possible through a mixed method research approach, which was supported by techniques such as content analysis, semi-structured interviews and direct observation. All this enabled us to understand the problems facing community radio stations in this part of the country. Through the analysis in this paper two issues were raised, namely the adaptation of community radio stations to the conflict situation and the human and financial challenges that tend to slow down the action of community radio stations in building peace. These findings enabled the generation of evidence-based policy suggestions aimed at improving the functioning and peacebuilding role of community radios in the Far-North Region of Cameroon in particular and other parts of Cameroon experiencing similar situational constraints. As such, the findings have important policy implications for key communication, peacebuilding and development stakeholders and practitioners interested in building peace in conflict affected and socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

Keywords: Cameroon, Community radio stations, conflict, peacebuilding, Far-North.

Introduction

Community radio is the main means of social communication in rural areas. Since its advent in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular, it has established itself as a medium for action that is constantly evolving and adapting to the new needs and expectations of its listeners. (Nono Njepang, 2012)

Without being a panacea, community radio has proven to be a dynamic medium, capable of contributing in a short space of time to significant transformations in a community, a class, or a group of individuals (Sarr, 2018). In times of conflict, where the media can be instrumental in promoting peace (Frère, 2005,), community radio is proving to be an effective tool in conflict management, thanks to its accessibility in terms of broadcasting and reception. This is the case with community radio stations in the Far-North region, a conflict zone in Cameroon. For several years now, they have been promoting peace and living together between host and displaced populations. The large-scale migration caused by the insecurity and environmental situation in the Lake Chad Basin region has been a major source of conflict between populations, over natural resources (Sambo, 2023; Magrin and Lemoalle, 2020; Chauvin et al, 2020). The involvement of community radio stations was therefore more than necessary because of their informative, educational, and mediating functions

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However, the socio-economic situation in the Far-North region is undermining the work of community radio stations in times of conflict and is putting the spotlight back on their ability to provide reliable, pragmatic information that is a factor in peace and social cohesion. These media are faced with multiple challenges. On the one hand, there are human resources related challenges: a small staff, poorly qualified and trained in the radio tool and the principle of promoting peace. On the other hand, are financial challenges: their financial situation is non-existent and fundamentally non-profitmaking, community radio stations depend on seasonal and random donations from non- governmental organizations (NGOs). These challenges are creating a precarious situation that could compromise the identity and peace-oriented actions of these community radio stations, and thus limit their work for peace in this region plagued by insecurity. It is this gap between theory and practice of community radios as peacebuilding instruments that motivates the decision to carry out this research with the aim of contributing to enhancing the effectiveness of community radio stations as instruments for peacebuilding in conflict affected and economically disadvantaged local communities.

1. Methods of Data Collection

Empirical data for this research was collected in January 2021, using the mixed research method, which combines both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. The use of a mixed method approach allowed for a more complete and in-depth understanding of the issues under study than either a quantitative approach or a qualitative approach alone. By employing both the quantitative approach or a qualitative approach, the mixed method was potentially able to compensate for the limitations of each method in understanding the problem in its general and specific aspects. In this work, the qualitative and quantitative aspects can be observed in the techniques used, such as content analysis, which according to Berelson (1971; p18) is "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications". It made it possible to carry out an objective, exhaustive, methodical and quantitative examination of a body of information with a view to drawing out what it contains that is significant in terms of the research objectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the people in charge of the community radio stations. These semi-structured interviews enabled the interviewers to express themselves freely and to obtain broader and deeper insights on the phenomenon studied. Not forgetting direct observation, which made it possible to combine what was heard from radio station managers and community members with the facts that were observed directly in the field. Direct observation enabled us to observe and get a feel of the realities on the ground.

Two community radio stations were purposefully chosen for this study. These are Echos des Montagnes and Bangao FM. They were chosen on the basis of their location, as they are situated in the localities that are home to most of the displaced people and record a high rate of inter-communal conflict. The choice of these radio stations was justified by the need to strengthen their capacity and impact in the face of the various inter-community conflicts, by strategically addressing the difficulties they face through evidence-based policies. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the interviewees. This was done on the basis of the experience and position of each radio staff member. Altogether, seven(7) people were interviewed from both Radio stations: the station manager, the program manager, the technician and a presenter at Radio Echos des Montagnes. The station manager of Bangao FM who is also head of programs was also interviewed, as well as the technician and the presenter.

The peace radio programs broadcasted by Echos des Montagnes and Bangao FM and the program schedules of these different radio stations were used in data analysis. Analysis was carried out making use of the analysis grids instrument, inspired by those used to analyze press discourse (Leray, 2008). The methodology employed in this research made it possible to analyze the programs and understand the conditions in which they are produced, in order to identify the difficulties faced by community radio stations in producing content that can contribute to peace-building.

2. Theoretical Framework of Analysis

This analysis in this paper was powered by two theoretical perspectives, the Interactionist and the Two-step flow theories. On the one hand, the Interactionist sees social processes such as conflict, cooperation and identity formation as the origin of human interactions. This school of thought was developed by the Chicago School (Montoussé and Renouard; 2002). According to the authors of this school, interaction is the basic social relationship. Interactionism therefore explains how humans shape society and are shaped by society through the meanings that arise in interactions. Building on shared behavioral interests can promote positive social behavior and change violent social behavior. The involvement of community radio in this interaction gives meaning to the relationship that community radio has with community members. This theory emphasizes the need to identify ways of encouraging actors at the micro level of society to give positive social meaning to their communities and to focus on peace-building. In the context of this research, this theory makes it possible to understand the conflict through their interaction, but also the result of their interaction with the community radios.

On the other hand, the Two-step flow theory is the work of Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz (Rampon; 2011). The researchers wanted to know whether mass media messages actually have a direct influence on the population. They found that media messages (such as radio and newspapers) have much less influence than informal, personal communication on behavior. This is how they introduced the concept of the 'opinion leader'. According to Elihu Katz, "the hypothesis that ideas often circulate from radio and the written press to opinion leaders and from the latter to the less active sections of the population has been tested in several successive studies" (Katz; 1957). This theory makes it possible to demonstrate the consequences when the message does not reach the target directly. The language barrier, which hinders direct contact between community radio and the population, means that "opinion leaders" are involved, who, according to this theory, do not deliver a faithful message. This could explain the upsurge in conflicts, which in a way hampers the work of community radio stations in communicating for peace.

3. The Evolution of Community Radio Stations in the Far-North Region.

3.1 Community radio stations at the service of the people

It is almost impossible to give a general and precise definition of community radio that fits into a universal model, as it varies according to the realities of each country. Numerous research works have dealt with the question and a series of aspects have been retained because they are identifiable in all spheres. According to Boulc'h (2003), in theory, community radio is a medium: private, local, not-for-profit, belonging to a given community, participatory, managed in a representative and democratic way by its community, but also providing a service to the community.

However, no radio station, especially in Africa, can fully comply with these principles, in particular because of the context in which they were created and the difficulties with which most community radio stations operate. That said, the principles mentioned above should serve as a reference point for the various community radio actors in their different activities. Thus, certain points are indisputable to be considered a community radio station. In its report proposing criteria for the establishment of a community radio sector in the United Kingdom, the Community Media Association (Price-Davis & Tacchi, 2001, p. 61), after studying community radio stations in six countries around the world, identified the following points common to all these countries:

- Be a not-for-profit organization;
- Serving specific communities both geographically and in terms of shared interests;
- Have management structures that are representative of the communities the station is intended to serve;
- Provide programming that is relevant to the community served.

Thus, the term community radio implies that ownership and control of the station belongs to the community whose interests it defends. The aim, then, is not to do something for the community but rather to give the community the means to do something for itself. Broadcasting thus demonstrates its supremacy over other media through its ability to ignore borders and to be freer and more accessible (Albert & Tudesq, 1986, pp. 40-47).

In Cameroon, the very first community radio stations became exposed in 1998. Their creation was sponsored by the Cameroon Government with technical and financial support from the Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie, (AIF) (Berqué, 2007, p. 81). Since then, community radio stations have provided a means of expression for people who feel frustrated or traumatized, wronged by the public media and forgotten when decisions are made that affect them. Community radio has become a commonplace consumer item, spontaneously bringing together dozens of listeners, and uniting the group both within the family unit and at neighborhood level (Tjadè Eonè, 1986, pp. 235-236).

During interviews with Younoussa (Divisional Communications Delegate), he noted that "in 2021, Cameroon had 147 community and neighborhood radio stations with broadcasting rights, according to the Ministry of Communication records. However, a number of associations and individuals are setting up stations without respecting the channels prescribed by the government". The Far North region, has thirteen recognized community radio stations. These radio stations are very often the initiative of UNESCO, churches, NGOs or even the State through the National Participatory Development Program (PNDP). Radio Echos des Montagnes, for example, is one of the radio stations present in the Far-North Region. It serves the Mayo-Tsanaga Division, which borders Nigeria and, according to statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), is home to 4,988 internally displaced persons and refugees because of the Boko-Haram war activities. This community radio station is the only one in the entire Mayo-Tsanaga Division. Radio Echos des Montagnes began broadcasting in 2007 thanks to support from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Like Echos des Montagnes, Bangao FM was launched in 2012. Operating in the Diamaré Division, it was set up by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It was set up to implement a series of actions aimed at improving the living conditions of the populations concerned through a range of support measures designed to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the areas of agriculture, livestock breeding, other income-generating activities, health, education, etc.

3.2 Adapting Community Radios to Conflict and Peacebuilding Work.

Since 2014 and even before, Cameroon has been hosting large numbers of internally displaced people and refugees in the Far North region, fleeing clashes and attacks caused by the terrorist group Boko-Haram. They come from the border corridor between Cameroon and Nigeria as well as Chad. In May 2023, the Far-North Region had 742,804 internally displaced persons and refugees, according to UNHCR figures (UNHCR; 2023). With the ever-increasing number of these displaced people, natural resources have become increasingly scarce, giving rise to numerous conflicts, due to the scarcity of resources, prejudice, and the stigmatization of displaced people. These massive displacements have exacerbated the problems of underdevelopment and poverty and undermined the traditional mechanisms of social cohesion.

This large influx of migrants has led to the rehabilitation of several community radio stations and the strengthening of their technical and human capacities, with the aim of better participating in and promoting peaceful cohabitation between host populations and displaced persons in the region. This situation has prompted many community radio stations to reorganize their program schedules. Radio Échos des Montagnes, for example, which was set up as part of the Communication for Behavior Change in Adolescent Reproductive Health project, received training in local program development in 2015 (Maman, 2019, p.4). This training was called "rapid response for resilience and conflict prevention for the populations of the Far North and East of Cameroon" and focused on peacebuilding, mediation, conflict prevention and education for non-violence. This project was a response to the issue of the reception and integration of refugees and internally displaced persons heading for the interior of the country. The project was a joint initiative of UNESCO, UNDP, and

FAO in partnership with the Cameroon government, and involved several community radio stations in the region and the country. On the UNESCO website, it can depict that these stations were chosen for their ability to reach the most remote areas by broadcasting news and educational programs in local languages.

Given the large wave of displaced people in the Far-North Region, the aim of these innovative programs was to improve the prevention of violent conflict and inter-community dialogue between the host populations and the displaced people. It also aimed to raise awareness among young people vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. A number of programs have been produced, particularly on substantive issues aimed at creating links between the different communities (UNESCO 2016). With the Far-North Region surrounded by villages regularly hit by the Boko Haram terrorist attacks, listeners will then have become aware of the importance of welcoming displaced people and resolving conflicts non-violently.

The Echos des Montagnes radio program schedule has been evolving since 2017. According to the managers of this radio station, it has been remodeled to include programs that are important for living together. This is in line with the challenges faced by the radio station and the problems affecting the community. The problem of receiving displaced people has been dealt with at length, and the problem of living together and managing resources has proved to be a new problem and a new challenge for this community radio station. Also, according to comments collected from the managers of Bangao FM, this radio has not 'missed the boat' when it comes to adapting its programming. With the security situation in the region deteriorating, the radio station has shifted its focus to the search for peace. It adapted as it went along and became a mediator between communities and a relay between the authorities, the elite, NGOs, and the population.

4. The Challenges Facing Community Radio Stations in Peacebuilding work

Data analysis revealed that the of community radio stations for peace are particularly hampered by human and financial challenges. However, whatever the extent of their capacities, their importance, and their great interests, community radio stations face difficulties in fully developing and expressing their full peace potential to the public. According to interviews, analysis of peace programs and fieldwork observations, community radio stations are faced with a host of challenges, most of which are related to the payment of bills, problems with the acquisition and maintenance of equipment, a small number of poorly qualified and trained staff, voluntary work, and so on. Yet community radio stations in the Far-North region can play a key role in non-violent conflict resolution between displaced persons and host populations. Thanks to their programs and their proximity to the population, community radio operators encourage people to live together and manage resources between communities together.

4.1 Human Resources

The main difficulty facing community radio stations in this part of the country is the glaring lack of human resources. This has a major impact on the quality and quantity of the work and the missions of community radios. The difficulties on the human front can be seen in a number of areas, including the shortage of staff. As a non-profit organization, staff is recruited on a voluntary basis, so staff changes are frequent, which hampers the station's operations. Despite the initial enthusiasm of the new recruits, the lack of pay and the conditions and realities of working in community radio stations mean that they soon resign or give up their jobs because they have found better work elsewhere or have turned to farming during the rainy season. As one interviewee pointed out:

Volunteers cannot work forever under this status. We understand them, no-one can work for free all their life. Very often when they find something better elsewhere, they leave. Then you end up with programs without a presenter. As far as the program schedule must be respected, we end up with a lot of repeats, but above all some programs are broadcasted in French. But these cases are rare. The aim is not to overload the presenters, who often have 3 or 4 programs to present (Interview with Ms. Hapsatou, Head of Programs at Echos des Montagnes)

Another problem is the lack staff training. Most of the staff are still unqualified and untrained in radio and even in the principle of peace promotion. They are also not trained to manage the equipment, which often leads to rapid damage. The reduction in the diversity of programs, especially in local languages, is a consequence of the lack of staff, which affects a certain part of the population, especially displaced persons.

4.2 Financial challenges

Even if these community radio stations can bring about a change of mentality and provide support during conflicts, development, and social cohesion, they do not have the freedom to grow as they would like. Because of the human and financial aspects, these radio stations can only broadcast a limited number of hours for several reasons, above all financial. As Poulton et al. (1999) point out, community radio networks remain vulnerable on two fronts: financial and political. "There is no money for a sinking fund to replace ageing equipment. Even if the management has mastered the ambitious idea of long-term planning. Their agenda is day-to-day survival" (p.30). However, it seems that when a partnership exists with an NGO, things are resolved satisfactorily within a reasonable period; but NGOs do not intervene regularly or systematically. Very often, pleas are made to these organizations for help, both for the radio station and for the local population. "We look for partnerships with NGOs to get financial aid, but also when it comes to proposing projects set up by the radio for the community," (interview with Raskam, Head of the Bangao Fm radio station). The lack of financial resources also affects the maintenance and renewal of production and office equipment, the payment of bills, particularly water, electricity, and telephone bills, and above all the payment of salaries. This challenge can cause the radio station to lose its autonomy and independence, leaving it vulnerable and at the mercy of those who want to use it to control the population for their own selfish ends. Hence, it is likely that, the financial constraints faced by community radio stations make them easy prey for opportunistic elites and politicians seeking popularity, who could use them for purposes contrary to the radio station's mission and hence making them ineffective and even counter-productive in community peacebuilding

and development work.

5. What Way Forward for Community Radio Stations as Community Peacebuilding instruments.

To better understand the challenges facing these media and improve their social impact, it is important to ask the following question: have the communities really taken ownership of their radio stations? This is a legitimate question because of the relationship between communities and community radios. In the case study at hand, the distance between this medium and the population, for whom radio is merely a means of accessing information can be seen. According Sarr (2018) "the success of community radio stations depends on the steps taken in the creation process" (p.23). Indeed, a series of prerequisites are fundamental in the phase preceding the actual setting up of the radio station. One of these prerequisites is the imperative need for a community-based approach to the appropriation of radio by communities (ibid). This distance could be explained by the context in which these radio stations were created, which in a way offered them to the local population, who are disconnected from this tool. This reappropriation would be a crucial step towards greater consideration for this medium of communication in these conflict zones of the Far-North Region. Community radio stations need to focus on community anchoring, which is in fact a major challenge that the entities responsible for running the radio must take up, by moving away from the trap of routine and ease that constantly threatens them (ibid, p. 43).

Since they cannot earn money from advertising like commercial radio stations, they must be resourceful to make ends meet. Donor countries, NGOs, faith-based organizations, and local elites fund most community radio stations, among others. Sarr (2018) said that community radio stations are highly dependent on internal or external groups, NGOs, local authorities, economic, cultural, or religious entities and other groups that have, in one way or another, contributed significantly to their establishment or operation. However, radio stations cannot allow themselves to receive money from just any source for fear of coming up against interest groups, pressure groups or influence groups. They would then be diverted from their main objective, which is to serve the interests of their community, and would end up serving those of their funders. For this reason, it would be important for the public to play a greater part in the running and management of the radio station. This is why Abdou Sarr, a precursor of community radio in Senegal, asserts that "when the radio meets the needs of the communities, they are concerned and are always willing to invest in supporting it in the pursuit of its mission" (ibid, p.79). The community radio station therefore belongs to the community, and the local people should be involved in financing its expenses. By involving local associations (women's associations, youth associations, development committees, etc.) and even traditional authorities (the djoworat, lawanat, lamidat), fundraising should be organized on a quarterly, half-yearly or annual basis, depending on the realities of each community. In this way, the radio will belong entirely to the community.

In the absence of law or legislation on the funding of community radio stations, it is imperative to find pragmatic solutions. Solving the financial problem of these community radio stations is tantamount to solving most of the problems they face. This financial recovery will make up for the lack of staff who can be trained and put in place over an extended period and will also ensure the day-to-day financial affairs of the community radio stations.

Conclusion

Community radio was born largely to mitigate external influence on the control of information by the state or groups of people. In fact, it was born generally with the aim of relieve people of the informational isolation in which they often live (Fraser; Restrepo Estrada, 2011). It can also be said to be a response to the marginalization of minorities. This is in line with the thinking of Tudesq (1998) when he states that the media and especially community radio are, in Africa, more guides than reflections of a public opinion in the process of being formed; they can contribute to changing mentalities and behavior, to developing collective efforts but can also contribute to antagonisms and inter-communal conflicts.

The aim of this study was to identify the challenges faced by community radio stations in promoting and building peace in times of conflict, specifically in the Far-North Region of Cameroon that is affected by the Boko Haram war activities. The analysis focused on two community radio stations: Echos des Montagnes and Bangao Fm, which both broadcast in conflict zones. In the light of the research findings, it is evident that while community radio stations are important instruments in the establishment of social cohesion and sustainable peace, they are not without critical short comings.

Community radio is an interactive medium that offers the possibility for greater participation by members of the community. By broadcasting programs in the languages used by local people, the radio reaches people who would otherwise be excluded from relevant information and the decision-making process. Thanks to this participation, community radio stations are not only relays for the concerns and needs of the local population, but also trainers, educators and mediators, who contributes to more peaceful cohabitation between populations and thus to (violent) conflict prevention.

However, the reality is quite different. Through the analysis in this paper, some critical challenges faced by these community radios in the process of producing peace programs that can help build peace were identified. These difficulties include among others lack of equipment, lack of skills, lack of staff, lack of funding, and the detachment of communities from the life of the radio station. Very often, community participation is limited to interventions during radio debates, in question-and-answer games, or even brief passages of greetings and other personal messages. The main problem is that many community radio operators do not see this as any other tool. This limits community participation in the life of community radio.

It would therefore be advantageous for the community radio stations in this conflict ridden and economically disadvantaged region, and indeed in Cameroon and Africa in general as a whole, to devise strategies to activate the involve of the local population in both the production of programs and in the funding for the running of the effective functioning of community radio stations. In this way, the community radio stations would be better able to contribute to peacebuilding work in more positive ways. As such, the

findings have important policy implications for key communication, peacebuilding and development stakeholders and practitioners interested in building peace in conflict affected and socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

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