

## Radio Waves for You *(first story)*

On the small island of Saponda in East Indonesia, where electricity is on only from 6 p.m. to midnight and where there is no newspaper and very limited access to TV and radio programs, people yearn for information. To address this need, a group of fishermen, representing the island's 1040 residents, unanimously decided that community radio would be the way to go. That is why a group of radio volunteers got together in January 2005 to discuss how they would build a better community radio station.

Saponda Island, no wider than a tenth of Changi International Airport in Singapore, already had some basic equipment. The station had been airing for more than six months using an Mp3 player, a transmitter, a microphone and an antenna. They do not use a computer because electricity is on for only six hours or even less each day.

But the volunteers who met in January did not discuss equipment. They were more interested in the principle of community radio and what concrete actions they needed to take to ensure that their station would survive and prosper.



**Caption:** Saponda Island is located in the offshore of Kendari city; the capital of Southeast Sulawesi. The island covers an area of 7.8 hectares with 240 family units, the majority of whom are fishermen.

Photographed by Shita Laksmi

Discussing the content of radio programs, Handoyo, group leader of fishermen and a member of the community radio board, said people in Saponda are keen on listening to traditional poetry on radio. Kasmadi, the head of the elementary school in Saponda,

however, said they need more. They needed educational programs on the air. “We only have four teachers in the elementary school and we need an alternative means to educate Saponda’s children,” he said<sup>1</sup>.

Kasmadi was correct. A survey of the island shows that Saponda has only one elementary school, a modest building in the middle of the island. It does not have a junior high school. If children want to study beyond the elementary level, they must sail to another island, which is difficult and time-consuming. Because of this, most adults in Saponda only manage to finish their elementary education. “The highest level of education is a high school diploma,” says Syamsul, also known as Aco, an activist from the Bahari Foundation who has been helping Saponda over the last two years.

Aco says that in April 2004, Saponda residents were beginning to realize that they needed an alternative medium to disseminate news. There were no newspapers on the island and they could pick up only two national channels for television and three nearby radio stations. In April 2004, led by a group of fishermen, the residents met and decided that a community radio station would solve this problem, says Aco.

Saponda is a good example of what is happening all over Indonesia.

Community radio has arrived with a bang in Indonesia.

Defined as low power broadcasting and channel by the people, from the people, to the people and about the people, community radio began to flourish in early 2000 two years after Soeharto stepped down. During that year, the Indonesian Parliament began to recognize the importance of community radio and passed a new broadcasting law to replace the more restrictive one before it.

Combine Resources Institution, a nongovernmental organization, estimates that there are about 500 community radio stations throughout Indonesia.<sup>2</sup>

In West Java, for example, there are 48 radio stations under the West Java Community Radio

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the writer’s observation and discussion with Saponda people in Saponda Island on January 11 – 12, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Combine Resources Institutions presentation in West Sumatera, December 4, 2004.

Network --locally known as JRK Jawa Barat.<sup>3</sup> Another network, the Farmer Community Radio Network, lists 200 stations. Yurinda Hidayat, the farmer network leader, says these are figures for 2003 that still need to be updated.<sup>4</sup>

Increasingly, community radio stations are helping to resolve community problems.

Majalaya Sejahtera (Prosperous Majalaya) FM, located in Majalaya regency, 30 kilometers southeast of the West Java capital of Bandung, is one example. The radio station was established by the the Majalaya Sejahtera Community Forum, a group formed on October 21, 2000, as a venue for discussions among community members including village leaders, youth organizations, the military, pesantren (Islamic traditional boarding school) and even street food vendors. This forum helped identify problems among the groups.

In establishing its radio station, the forum concluded that community radio could be used as a strategic tool for disseminating information, education, and entertainment.<sup>5</sup>

In one instance, Mase FM helped resolve a conflict between the Indonesian National Electricity Company (PLN) and the village of Majalaya, where residents were using illegal connections that caused service disruptions. The radio station initiated a series of discussions between PLN and the community and pinpointed the problem.

“The community could not afford to pay for the 900-watt capacity per household but PLN was no longer producing below 900 watts because this was not profitable,” says Deden Sunega<sup>6</sup>, studio manager of Mase FM.

Using community radio as an advocacy tool, Mase FM succeeded in getting PLN to accommodate the villagers with a 450-watt capacity. “PLN at last distributed 2,000 new capacities specially for that village,” Deden says.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on an interview with Gani Rahman, the leader of West Java Network, November 29, 2004 at SKEPO office, Bandung.

<sup>4</sup> Based on the writer's knowledge and confirmation via telephone with Yurinda Hidayat, January 2005

<sup>5</sup> Majalaya Sejahtera profile, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Deden Sunega, studio manager of Mase FM, December 18, 2004 at the Mase FM studio.

Although the problem was successfully resolved, Deden adds that Mase FM initially found it difficult to obtain updated information about the village. “Due to lack of resources, especially staff, it was a long shot for us to make both parties clearly understand the terms involved.” Fortunately, Mase FM gained the commitment from both sides to resolve the problem, he says.

In December 18, 2004, the radio station played host to a community celebration marking the mass circumcision of 72 boys, a coming of age ritual in Indonesia.

The celebration, organized in cooperation with the Al Maqsoem Foundation, brought together the entire community. Some brought food or volunteered their services; some performed West Java songs – a staple on Mase FM that commercial stations do not play.

The ceremony itself was aimed at helping community members who could not afford the traditional celebration after circumcision, Deden says.

“The expensive part of circumcision is actually the celebration. It is our culture that every circumcision has to be followed by some sort of festivity. That is why we decided to assist in organizing this ceremony, of course with participation from community members.” Deden says. “This is the advantage of having community radio.”



Caption:

One of the performances in Mase FM “Mass Circumcision’s Celebration”, held on December 18 2004 at the Mase FM yard.  
Photographed by Shita Laksmi

In neighboring Timor Leste — formerly East Timor, community radio is an instrument of peace and dialogue, says Reinaldo Borges, a manager of the Community Radio Center, who spoke at the

AMARC (The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters) regional conference.

Community airwaves have been used by Commission for Truth and Reconciliation to disseminate information about the program for peace and dialogue. At the same time, community radio can be used as a tool to encourage many refugees in Timor Leste to go back to their homes after the outbreak of violence in 1999. Many people are afraid of retaliation and not willing to go back, says Borges. They need information of what is happening in Timor Leste. “Two community radios in the border areas, one established by UNESCO and the other established under my project, were able to reach out to those refugees, taking advantage of the broadcast range that reached well into Indonesian territory.”<sup>7</sup>

### **No clear rules**

Despite the benefits that community radio brings, there are few clear-cut rules governing their operation. In Indonesia almost all community radio stations do not have a license though some obtain an endorsement from the regional government.

According to the Broadcasting Law, all radio stations had until December 28, 2004 to abide by new regulations, but there is still a large degree of uncertainty over how licenses will be assigned.

Bimo Nugroho, a member of Indonesian Broadcasting Commission locally known as Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia (KPI) explains. “We had initiated a procedure and disseminated application forms for licenses in almost all regions in Indonesia but the version of the application form was more for private broadcasting,” Bimo says. “The big problem was, we have done it without Government Regulation<sup>8</sup>”

The earthquake and tsunami that devastated Aceh in December 2004, meanwhile, has diverted government attention from all other concerns, including community radio. KPI discussions on

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<sup>7</sup> AMARC Asia Pacific Report, [http://www.asiapacific.amarc.org/files/AMARC\\_asia\\_pacific\\_report.pdf](http://www.asiapacific.amarc.org/files/AMARC_asia_pacific_report.pdf). Accessed on January 3, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Government Regulation is a detail regulation under law. In Indonesia known as, Peraturan Pemerintah (PP).

government regulations have been temporarily postponed.

Bimo explains why it is taking so long time to iron out the regulations.<sup>9</sup>

“The government and KPI still disagree over who should give out licenses,” he says. “The government wants the authority, which means the KPI would just be a rubber stamp. Of course we refuse this notion. According to the law, KPI is the legitimate institution to give out licenses.”

This conflict and uncertainty serve only to confuse people involved in community radio. In various meeting, KPI and the government kept saying, “28 December 2004 all stations should have licenses.”<sup>10</sup> But in reality, community radio stations are not provided with necessary information on what they should do or at least know where to ask.

In Central Java, for example, the regional KPI representative was not even aware about the regulations. The situation was similar in West Sumatera.

In the province of Yogyakarta, the Community Radio Network and the regional KPI came to an agreement and built their own mechanism. They modified the application form and came up with their own version. The result: many of the network’s members were registered before the December 28 deadline, says Widjanarko, a member of Yogyakarta network.<sup>11</sup>

### **Ahead in Asia**

Despite its difficulties, Suman Basnet, the coordinator of the Asia Pacific Region World Association of Community Broadcasters (AMARC) says Indonesia is one step ahead of other Asian countries. As an international organization that supports and serves community broadcasters around the world, AMARC notes that in Japan and Malaysia community radio is not even recognized.

In Japan, government has set up so called community radio stations but these are sponsored and serve as propaganda machines for local governments.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Bimo Nugroho on January 6, 2005 at the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission Office, Jakarta.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the writer’s observation in various meeting that attended by KPI or government members.

<sup>11</sup> Based on a short interview with Widjanarko on January 2005. Writer has done clarification on these statements with him.

In Malaysia, the situation is even more restrictive. The government has barred community radio. As a result, people who want to build a community radio service do it from outside the country, beaming information back into Malaysia.

AMARC noted down that in Thailand, community broadcasting is written into the constitution, but the legal infrastructure is still missing. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) is supposed to formulate the Thailand Broadcasting Law, but a five-year effort has borne no fruit. “It has come to a bureaucratic trap,” Basnet says.

In Sri Lanka, the government has taken over 10 licensed community radio stations. “If you talk privately to government officials, they will tell you they are worried about rebel groups getting the licenses,” Basnet says.

In comparison to these countries, Indonesia fares much better because it already has many community radio stations working at the grassroots level. People are aware of the importance of community radio, and this is recognized in the law. “What is left is the need for clear procedures,” Basnet says.

Imam Prakoso, director of the Combine Resource Institution, shares the same optimism.

“Community radio has gained support from all sides, from national policies to civil society,” he says. In fact, there is a growing interest in putting up community radio stations, he adds.<sup>12</sup>

Imam continues: “The supporters realize that community radio is a strategic medium for communication, entertainment or disseminating information.”

What Saponda has done confirms with Imam.

Another good illustration of this was how the Angkringan community radio station in Timbulhardjo Yogyakarta helped voters choose their village leaders beyond mere charisma or religion.

With Indonesia’s first direct election for regional government coming in June 2005, community radio is trying to assume a more significant role. Twelve community stations in West Java for example,

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<sup>12</sup> E-mail interview with Imam Prakoso on January 26, 2005.

have grouped themselves to track the performance of political candidates. The danger lies in the partisanship. “That is why we want to build a code of conduct,” says Dadan Sanusi<sup>13</sup> from Kombas radio.

Throughout Indonesia, activism and democracy are spreading at the grassroots level. Under such conditions, community radio is likely to flourish, giving their constituents a voice that demands to be heard.

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<sup>13</sup> Based on a short interview with Dadan Sanusi via telephone on January 29, 2005.