

**Responses to  
Consultation Paper on Issues related to Community Radio Stations (dated July 21,  
2022)**

**August 30, 2022**

In response to the issues raised by TRAI on its consultation paper on community radio, dated July 21, 2022. The following is suggested by Archana Kapur, Founder SMART/RADIO MEWAT.

**Q 1. Should the not-for-profit companies, registered under section 8 of the Companies Act 2013, be permitted to establish Community Radio Stations (CRS)? Should the existing terms and conditions for establishment of Community Radio Stations and Government's supporting scheme be made applicable to such not-for-profit companies? Please provide justification for your response.**

The existing policy guidelines for community radio already mention "registered societies and autonomous bodies and public trusts registered under Societies Act *or any other such act* relevant for the purpose." That provision seems to provide a window for Section 8 companies established as not-for-profit entities to be permitted to establish CR stations. There are a range of not-for-profit organisations that operate legally in the country and there may not be much of a difference between NGOs and Section 8 companies in operational terms.

However, we are not in favour of allowing Section 8 Companies to be allowed to set up community radio stations, as it would take away from the initial mandate and purpose of community radio stations. The original intent of opening the airwaves for community radio to provide access to media dark areas and to allow poor and deprived communities a voice in the public sphere may be further diluted with this move. As these companies get some special privileges under the Act and may have deeper pockets, non-negotiable principles of community radio, such as local community participation, voluntarism, and local content may all be sidelined in favour of a more professionally driven management. If a number of these companies start garnering frequencies, there may be nothing left for community-based organisations and NGOs who were originally thought of as the legitimate players in this field.

If at all the Govt thinks otherwise, then we suggest that the screening process currently followed must be a more democratic, transparent, representative, multi-stakeholder process. The Screening Committee must include (as it used to a few years ago) representatives of the community radio associations, representatives of organisations building capacity in the sector, those who have been working on CR Policy in the country, and individuals and organisations who have been conducting research on the CR sector. Section 8 companies that apply for permission to establish CR stations must be subjected to a rigorous scrutiny against all the current provisions of the policy guidelines. Their connect with the community, the purpose and other factors should be taken into consideration. The same conditions must be followed at the time of renewal.

**Q 2. What should be the prescribed license period for CRS in the Guidelines?**

**Q 3. What should be the period of extension/renewal on the expiry of the initial permission?**

**Q 4. What should be the terms & conditions for renewal/ extension of license period? Please provide list of compliances to be submitted by the organization operating a CRS for making an application of renewal.**

The current provision for a 5-year license period for community radio stations may be continued. As the MIB is aware, a number of licensees either end up never getting off the ground or discontinue operations in a year or two because of various unanticipated problems they encounter. The process of renewal at the end of five years allows the Ministry the opportunity to weed out such non-functional entities and also review the functioning of the stations as per the provisions of the Policy Guidelines.

Upon satisfactory review at the end of the initial five-year period, stations may be given an extension/renewal for a further period of 10 years..

We recommend that stations coming up for renewal may be asked to go through a peer review process, something on the lines of what MoIB did in 2014 across the country (see attached report by MIB Consultant). There are self-assessment tools that are available, developed by agencies such as the UNESCO Chair on Community Media and Ideosync Media Combine and supported by CEMCA and UNICEF, respectively (see attached toolkits). A report from the peer review process followed by a validation exercise to be undertaken by a five-member independent expert panel that could include a couple of 'senior' CR stations (with at least 10 years of experience); an academic specialist in community radio and/or an individual with extensive capacity building experience in the sector; and a consultant with expertise in the development and social sector. These processes will assess the station's broadcasting record, adherence to policy guidelines, and the non-negotiable principles of CR.

**Q 5. Should the existing limit of 7 minutes per hour on the duration of advertisement on CRS need to be revised? If yes, please suggest the limit on duration of advertisement on CRS with justification.**

Raising the upper limit on advertising on community radio to 12 minutes per one hour of on-air time is welcome. Removal of any restrictions on the potential for community radio stations to become more financially sustainable, while retaining their not-for-profit, non-commercial character, is a desirable initiative. As some of the recent steps being taken by MoIB are likely to help expansion of the community radio sector, it is possible that more and more stations will likely be able to harness the potential for selling airtime more effectively.

However, other international examples for establishing content grants for the creation of innovative content formats by CR stations can also be followed.

**Q 6. Should the not-for-profit organizations, operating in multiple districts, may be allowed to setup multiple CRS in their area of operation? If yes, should there be any additional terms and conditions governing such permissions? Should there be any cap on number of permissions granted to such not-for-profit organizations?**

We do not support this suggestion at all. Creation of media chains and promotion of conglomerates run counter to the spirit of community radio. In any country, the community radio ecology must reflect the diversity of its population, varied interests and issues, languages, and contribute to bringing about a pluralistic media landscape. A single 'owner' establishing multiple stations across different districts or states would promote homogeneous content and stifle local production that could reflect the local context. If there is a need felt by the community for a community radio station in their area, a not-for-profit entity that operates in that region should be able to apply for a license, not someone who already owns a station elsewhere. Without any consultation with relevant stakeholders, a provision has already been made for multiple ownership for educational institutions with multiple campuses. This would further compound that travesty of the principles of community radio.

**Q 7. What are the factors responsible for slow growth of CRS in India? Whether the current scheme for 'Supporting Community Radio Movement in India' is adequate to promote the CRS in India? What other measures can be undertaken to promote faster growth of CRS in India?**

There are many factors responsible for the slow growth of community radio in India. The unduly long process of obtaining a license, including clearances from multiple ministries, has been clearly a deterrent. While financial sustainability is a universal problem for community radios everywhere, it is the social and community sustainability that contributes to the continued relevance and survival of community radio.

The community radio movement in India has for a long time advocated the setting up of an autonomous Community Radio Support Fund (Working Paper, 2011), which has subsequently been transformed into a CR Support Scheme under the MIB. But grants to stations have been minimal and mostly confined to purchase of equipment. It is only recently that the Ministry is thinking of widening its ambit to include even costs of content production. There must be a transparent, representative, multi-stakeholder approach to disbursement of grants from an autonomous Support Fund. Various ministries could contribute to this fund and it may also be possible to encourage private companies, through their CSR, to donate to this corpus. Under the current process, it is essential to streamline long overdue payments from DAVP for CR stations that broadcast government advertising.

Government should also consider utilising a minuscule proportion of the Universal Service Obligation Fund (USoF) for strengthening the community radio sector and its sustainability.

We also recommend a return to the sectoral consultation processes that MoIB used to follow till a few years ago. The original 2001 policy for CR; the subsequent revision of the policy

guidelines; the commencement of the CR Sammelans; and the establishment of the CR Support Fund all emerged from extensive discussions with sectoral participants (CR stations, associations, and individuals and organizations with extensive engagement and comprehension of the sector).

**Q 8. Stakeholders may also provide their comments on any other issue relevant to the present consultation.**

**We recommend the Peer Review process to be restarted.**

Other recommendations are::

- Allow sharing of community radio towers with other parties, such as local Internet providers and cable operators that may want to use them on rent. This can also contribute to the sustainability of the stations.
- Monitor the performance of all the transmitters that are currently permitted so that their quality can be ensured. If needed, more market options for transmitters may be provided.
- Charge spectrum fee from the date of issuing of the wireless operating license (WoL) as delays in the licensing process results in license-holders having to pay even if they are not using the spectrum.
- Frame clear-cut guidelines for surrender/cancellation of WoL if the applicants or CR stations are found inactive for a certain period of time.
- Organise a review of all operating stations and make it mandatory to have atleast 4 persons working at each station or else it turns out to be a farce. It a station is run by only one staff- it is pointless
- KVKs should be given a license only if they have dedicated community members to run the station and not scientists who are faculty or researchers at the KVK.