

Community Radios for Democracy

Héctor Vides, director of the 'Association of Participatory Radios and Programmes of El Salvador', ARPAS, talks to Sean Hawkey about the critical role of community radios in the formation of democratic culture.



How does ARPAS operate?

ARPAS has 28 affiliated radios and 6 productions centres. There is great variety among the radios, some are well established and others are suffering financial worries, especially in the current economic crisis the country is going through.

On a technical level we are quite developed, we have digital production and editing, a coordination system, a training system. We are looking at how to optimise the output from our combination of capacities.

ARPAS splits its main focus into two fundamental areas: The first focus is internally, looking at our own financial sustainability, organisational skills, our cultural identity. The other focus is external, our public image, how to position ourselves as people who are worried about human development, freedom of speech

and communication.

We've been busy evaluating and planning for four years, since the successful end to our struggle for the legalisation of community radios in the country, getting the frequency space 92.1FM and a new law to back community radio. Since then we've seen a boom of community broadcasting though not all radios have reached their highest potential and growth. This has provoked a lot of reflection and self-study. We've also been busy covering elections, the elections of 1997, 1999, 2000, 2003 and now we're preparing for 2004.

How does election coverage by ARPAS radios differ from the coverage by mass media?

The most ambitious of mass media sometimes have a few reporters dotted around the country, but this is an expensive project in commercial media, and not very effective at reflecting society and its concerns. Seeing how we had a lot of the country covered by radios we saw how we could build networks, locally and regionally, in our zones of coverage, with reporters who could look for others sides of the news, so we started working on it.

We called this new way of working a 'network of networks' because we couldn't have a single network with a hub in San Salvador. Instead, we made a network of four big regions and each region was divided up into a network of radios and each radio had its own network of reporters. So, for the last election we ended up with 150 reporters across the country, all presenting their own local perspectives looking at what was important to them locally, the sum of all this is considerable coverage.

One aspect of our work is to try to give coverage on elections well before the elections happen. Previously election coverage was on election day. In 2000 we went from municipality to municipality but we were controlling everything from San Salvador, sending people from here to do the coverage, to speak with the local mayor and the people. But the thing was that the local radios should do that, the local rural radios are there and they should do it, so we started to do that.

Building a democratic culture

Of course, not all of the radios had the same capacity, so we started doing the build-up work with those that could, setting up forums, debates, interviews. This started building a democratic culture which helps the people to see more than the party political propaganda, to get to know politicians, to question candidates, to ask the party in local government, or the locally elected representative in legislative politics, to account for their time in power. All this gives political elections a different flavour. You can't get this sort of coverage from a distance.

No we've been getting politicians to account for themselves, we want to give greater emphasis to promoting citizen participation in elections, but with responsibility, and for this you have to present information. I think that is where the big difference is. In mass media, in the radios which are our direct competitors, most of them present the big candidates, the big names, but they don't look at the details: the departmental or municipal candidates which are the ones that really affect the people. This is why we've had a culture in El Salvador of voting for a party, not for the candidate that there is locally, we've been voting for someone famous in San Salvador and ignoring our local problems and local candidates.

How are you preparing for the next election?

Now the next election is different from the last because it is for the Presidency and we all have to see here that the government still manages municipal work centrally through the budgets which they control, so despite the existence of mayors on a municipal level, many things are still controlled from San Salvador. Municipal independence is relative not absolute. So if there is no human development, no roads, no schools on a local level, then we have to trace the responsibility back to the government. We have to measure local growth, local development, see if the local situation has got better or worse and see how the government has affected it. We have to look also at themes such as TLC, ALCA, the free trade agreements to see how they affect us day-to-day, the tendency is to see these things as distant, but we have to see what repercussions they have in our way of life. For example genetically modified seeds, the copyrighting of native seeds, these things will have serious repercussions on the way we work and live.

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