

Summary: S.M. Sehgal Foundation, a public charitable trust working at the grassroots across 11 states in India and running a community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat since 2012 in one of India's most backward districts, Nuh supports the inclusion of Section 8 companies in establishing community radio stations (CRS). This step will accelerate the process to bring to light lost voices especially from India's most backward regions facilitating their development trajectory. Technical skill building and funding opportunities need to be optimally utilized by existing and new CRS to ensure sustainability and realize their full potential. Web streaming and digitization of CR should also be undertaken for wider access and availability of broadcasted content. A CRS ombudsman needs to be the central monitoring authority to review the reach and content of the CRS.

Community radio can serve as a tool to empower the voices of the marginalized and vulnerable, thereby paving their path to development. However, its potential is not yet fully recognized and tapped, which, if done can drive communities to become aware and act towards their own development. Delivering community specific information in the local dialect helps connect with the audience better and provides them with a platform to raise concerns, be heard and build social cohesion.

S.M. Sehgal Foundation, through its over a decade long experience of running a community radio 'Alfaz-e-Mewat' supports the suggested inclusion of Section 8 companies to start Community Radio Stations (CRS). This step will: a) **aid faster growth of community radios** in the country by allowing capable organizations having the capacity to operate and sustain a CR, which currently do not fall in the policy's ambit. With only about 339 CRS in the country, such a step will **ensure wider outreach amplifying impact**, b) give an opportunity for CRS to be set up in remote districts which are **media dark leading to unheard voices being brought to light** and c) provide more **professional broadcasting services** with fund and content sustainability.

Running a community radio comes with its own set of challenges. Especially true for media dark districts, a serious lack of awareness and disconnect from the public services makes it more challenging to draw communities to use media as a platform to express, learn and access. Running Alfaz-e-Mewat since the past more than a decade is reflective of a success story where the local inhabitants '*Meos*' now use the radio to seek solutions to their problems, express the local constraints to realizing aspirations and direct the attention of the administration to the region. Witnessing such a positive response from an

aspirational district like Nuh proves the impact CRS can create among the communities and therefore more of them should be encouraged to set up.

With engaging content, financial support and consistent efforts, a community radio can successfully bridge the information divide and support the development process of the community. Sustainance is important to achieve the intended outcomes of CRS for which strong foundations need to be laid out. Alfaz-e-Mewat was set up in 2012 with seed funding from the Ministry of Agriculture, under its Agricultural Technology Management Agency scheme. More such enabling schemes need to be implemented that provide guidance, content monitoring and financial support to CRS that often struggle with funding and sustaining their operations. Apart from 'Supporting Community Radio Movement in India' scheme, utilizing CSR funds and monetary support from local authorities should also be allowed to ensure more CRS are established and strengthened.

Instead of a blanket approach, criteria for bandwidth, licensing and funding should be specified for each organization type (NGOs/ Educational Institution? KVK/ Section 8 companies) differently. This will ensure resources are provided as per the requirements and capacity of each CRS, leading to their optimal usage. The period of renewal on the expiry of initial license should be maintained at five years, giving the radio station adequate time to establish its content and viewers. It also helps in maintaining the quality and creativity of the content generated. A CR ombudsman in place would ensure all rules and regulations are being adhered to and that the major focus on communities is not being compromised.

¹ For further correspondence, Ms.Pooja O. Murada, Director, Outreach for Development can be contacted at poojamurada@smsfoundation.org