

Why is community radio an essential investment?



By [Luthando Mkumatela](#)

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The community broadcasting services sector (in particular, radio) plays a pivotal role in shaping the state of broadcasting in South Africa. It will continue to contribute immensely to shaping the future of radio broadcasting in South Africa.



Source: www.unsplash.com

According to the Broadcast Research Council of South Africa (BRCSA), in 2021, about 80% of South Africans tune into a radio station weekly, with most people still listening on traditional radio sets. There are 30 commercial radio stations (inclusive of three SABC commercial radio stations), 15 public radio stations as well as 271 community stations in South Africa.

The role of community radio in society

Community radio plays a significant role in South Africa as a source of information, education, and entertainment. For many years, the community radio sector has been a talent breeding ground for public and commercial broadcasting services to the extent that most well-known presenters and newscasters have started their careers at this grassroots level.



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These presenters and newscasters remain role models and inspirations to young up-and-coming radio personalities within their respective communities. Those who started their career at community radio stations will attest that they learnt everything – from gathering news from their local communities, editing soundbites, putting together a news bulletin and making sure it goes on air.

Some would say they learnt radio productions and presenting without reading a book, but through experiential training, at times, without proper guidance from their respective managers.

The dangers of non-compliance

The power of community radio stations remains unimaginable. However, all these good learnings and teachings of young people in community radio stations are at times marred by internal conflicts between the station personnel, managers, and board of directors.

Such conflicts have led to non-compliance with the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) regulations and the laws governing the community radio sector. Some stations have found themselves appearing before the Complaints and Compliance Committee (CCC). The CCC is a tribunal established in terms of the Icasa Act to hear, investigate and recommend possible sanctions to the Icasa Council in relation to community radio stations that have failed to execute their mandate as per the issued licence or have contravened the regulations.



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In the 2019/20 financial year, 29 community radio stations were shut down by Icasa for the simple reason of not applying for the renewal of their licences, even after they were informed in advance that the licences were due for renewal.

All those affected communities were denied their right to information, education, and entertainment because those they entrusted with the responsibility of governing the affairs of their radio stations failed in their fiduciary duties as members of the boards or management. The onus lies with the board of directors and management as the custodians of the licence and elected members by the community to oversee the affairs of the stations.

Community broadcasting regulations are the key to success

Icasa compliance reports compiled on an annual basis have shown that a lack of accountability, mismanagement of funds, internal conflicts, and lack of understanding of roles between the station manager and the board are some of the reasons community radio stations are unable to be sustainable and fail in their existence.

The very nature of the community broadcasting sector means that it lacks the kind of expertise, resources, financial means, consultants, and lawyers that its well-heeled counterparts in the commercial sector enjoy, hence all the problems we have encountered.

It is for this reason that Icasa began a process to review the community broadcasting framework, which culminated in the publication of the Community Broadcasting Services Regulations, 2019 (also referred to as 'The Regulations').

One of the most critical provisions within these Regulations is the introduction of regulation 5 which deals with Governance and Management. In short, this regulation provides clarity of roles between the Station Manager and the Board of Directors. For many years, this has been a challenge, where roles were somewhat blurry and created conflicts within community

radio stations.



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Another important inclusion in the Regulations (particularly as it relates to licencing applications) is regulation 4 – which requires an applicant to be registered as a non-profit organisation (NPO) that has been operating for at least two years prior to lodging an application for a community broadcasting service licence.

In this regard, an applicant must demonstrate the role it has played in community development and empowerment within the coverage area it would like to render community broadcasting service. This is important as it will show that the entity has been able to participate in community projects and has shown that it can account for its existence.

The invitation to pre-register

The Authority issued the Invitation To Pre-Register (ITP-R) for the licensing of new community radio station on 15 December 2021. Virtual workshops were held on 8 December 2021 (prior to issuing the ITP-R) and from 16 - 17 February 2022 with the intent to fully unpack the requirements of the ITP-R, and to assist communities to have a full understanding of the requirements while addressing any glaring challenges that may be raised during those proceedings.

It is time that community radio stations are run and operated as legitimate local businesses whose books are audited, pass the accounting tests, and implement clear policies so that they can continue to thrive; and not risk losing their licences due to a lack of accountability and proper governance structures.

The closing date for applications is 30 June 2022 and this gives communities ample opportunity to familiarise themselves with the requirements as outlined in the ITP-R and the Community Broadcasting Services Regulations.

ABOUT LUTHANDO MKUMATELA

Luthando Mumatela is currently serving as a Councilor of the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA). He has previously served at the Department of International Affairs of the ANC in Lusaka as the Senior Legal Resource.
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