

## South Africa: Giving Community a Voice at Radio Zibonele

### *Radio Zibonele*

#### *Khayelitsha, South Africa*

When Bill Siemering worked with the staff of the Open Society Foundation for South Africa (OSF-SA), beginning in 1994, they helped create a foundation to develop the community radio sector. In 1998, as part of an evaluation, they visited six stations and wrote case studies about them. Radio Zibonele, near Cape Town, was one of the most successful in this study. Last year Bill checked in with them for an update and this profile reflects the station's status in 2004.

### *Radio Zibonele*

Radio Zibonele is housed in a truck container among sandy flats nearby the Cape Town airport, in the township of Khayelitsha. The station is fulfilling its role as the voice of the local community, while at the same time actively involved in achieving broader development goals in the areas of health, environment, education, culture, and community participation. In Xhosa “Zibonele” means “we did it together”.

Radio Zibonele began transmitting in 1993, when the state still controlled all broadcasting, and was among the first community stations in South Africa. Initial broadcasts were assisted by



Gabriel Urgoti, an Argentinean physician and a respected figure in Khayelitsha who years earlier was involved in community radio in Latin America.

Broadcasting was illegal; the station managed to sneak on the air twice a week. Dr. Urgoti hid the radio transmitter under his examining table, and used it to air first-hand reports from health care workers about health problems they found in the community. A year later, in 1994,

Radio Zibonele obtained a license. Today it serves 700,000 residents and remains unwavering in its commitment to the health of the community.

Radio Zibonele has a reputation as one of the most transparent and participatory stations in the country, with a strong record of financial independence. Its mission is clear:

*Our concern is to enhance the quality of life through improving the health standards of our people. All those we serve are affected by poor health and poor environmental conditions. Radio Zibonele is committed to sharing skills and information through honest process, thereby empowering the community of Khayelitsha for better life.*

Self-help is the underlying theme of the station. Many programs deal with very practical issues: how to care for a child; how to start a small business; and for children, how to speak properly and help their mother when she is sick. Both the breadth and simplicity of the mission simplifies

decision-making. For example when a cigarette company offered to support the station with more than advertising, the station turned it down: smoking is not good for the health of the community.

Former station manager, Vusi Tshose, sees the station not just as a passive broadcaster but as a respected, independent organization actively engaged in solving the community's problems, both on the air and off-air. His greatest success was preventing a school strike by bringing the participants together to negotiate an end to their dispute.

### ***Mission-driven Programming***

Here are some of the other ways Radio Zibonele's mission has been reflected in its programming and its broader participation in the community:

- Community health workers continue to conduct on-air discussions of health issues they encounter in their home visits.
- High school teachers present on-air course summaries at the end of the year for students studying for final exams. Educators believe the reviews, as well as other tips on how to prepare for exams, have enabled more students to pass.
- When rival taxi groups were in a dispute, they were invited to the station to state their cases and ask the community how they should resolve it.
- Programs help reunite lost children with their families.
- Arts programs including church choirs and local musicians.
- The station organized and broadcast a day-long series of events celebrating the Xhosa culture, with food, music, poetry, and clothing.
- The station organized a clean-up campaign with a soft drink company providing a music truck and drinks; the local authority gave trash bags, gloves and a truck. Thousands of young people showed up to help.

In 2004 Radio Zibonele:

- On air 12 hours a day
- Information programming: 70%
- Music and entertainment: 30%
- Full time staff: 10
- Volunteers: 14
- Monthly operating costs: \$14,000; annual: \$168,00
- Self supporting with income from advertising and sponsorships.
- Audience: 80,000-97,000 weekly.

### ***Lessons Learned***

The lessons from Radio Zibonele are:

- A clear mission statement is like a guiding star; it gives direction and purpose to every aspect of the station's operation including decisions about advertisers.
- Both the community and its board of directors are active in the station.
- The station is not simply a passive transmitter of data and music, but a catalyst for community improvement and problem solving.
- A station can have a far-reaching effect in a community even if its facilities are very limited. While it is best to have two control rooms to produce programs while on-air, Radio Zibonele had just one -- in a truck container.
- Good management gives a strong sense of direction and motivates a large number of volunteers necessary to provide such a full service.