

Project assessment :

<p>Radio networking for democracy in Palestine</p>

General synthesis

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1. Pertinence

1.1. A difficult state of affairs

Created in the joyful aftermath of the Oslo agreement, not many of the local Palestinian private radio stations fulfilled their objectives concerning the representation of civilian society. Nor did they endeavor to promote on the air the wealth and diversity of democratic debates. But even more so, they didn't try to approach this revival of Palestinian public life as if it belonged to them, as if they were important and influent people, susceptible of gaining power amongst local or national authorities, as a result of their media coverage. Another motive stimulated the blossoming of the majority of these numerous stations: the opportunity to share this new commercial territory where the advertising takings promise to be juicy.

At that time, the programmes aired on the local stations were composed of 90% music and the majority of people listened to Israeli stations in Arabic. The programmes included very little service information. What's more, the Palestinian national radio "Voice of Palestine" was quite content to be the partisan station of the Fatah. But as years went on, certain stations began to show an interest in the local context of their programmes, becoming aware of the need to inform the Palestinian society and to develop their editing.

The standard of these radio stations deteriorated considerably during the second Intifada and then the election of the Hamas to power in 2006 which sent the whole country crashing into a serious financial crisis and lead to the fall of the advertising resources of the local stations. Consequences: worn-out equipment, of second-rate quality. Very poor quality broadcasts, the Palestinian stations had only second-rate, badly maintained transmitters. Very low level of technical qualifications, thus preventing them from improving their transmitting systems. Lastly, in the context where no authority or regulation whatsoever exists to oversee the FM band, we notice a saturation of radio productions.

Deprived of sufficient advertising resources, the stations must reduce the number of employees, primarily the journalists. Those who remain are sometimes voluntary workers, sometimes underpaid. The low wages lead to the employment of inadequately or badly trained employees and a very high instability amongst them. This permanent turnover doesn't promote a first-rate consistency of transmission nor a strategy to install more pertinent programming choices.

The local news programmes are often replaced by an influx of music, the only broadcasted news being a usually illegal retransmission of Al Jazeera. Through lack of money, the stations that chose to maintain their news broadcasts have only a minimum service to offer with brief news reports, an absence of documentation, a lack of news verification procedures and crossed sources.

In the perspective of economic and political radicalism, news is focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, thus marginalizing the handling of social, economical, cultural or sport related topics.... the journalistic distance is sacrificed on the alter of national interest.

1.2. The Amin Internews project

Faced with these serious difficulties endured by private Palestinian stations, and conscious of the great need and importance for local media, independent and efficient, the Amin team created, from 2002 onwards, with Internews Europe an ambitious project to support Palestinian radio stations.

The goal is “on the whole increasing access to Palestinians to non biased news reports and to boost radio programming concerning human rights and democratic reforms”. The objective is to provide support to 21 Palestinian radio stations spread across the entire territory (Gaza strip and Cisjordany-west bank).

Considering the position these stations are in, it’s urgent to start working on expanding the independent radio sector in Palestine by increasing the quantity, the diversity, and the quality of news broadcasted by these stations, by reinforcing the local radio station’s role within civilian society and in the support of democratic values, human rights and freedom of expression, so that the respect of these values becomes a reality.

These objectives lean towards projects such as technical training and managing news from every angle. Crucial help to better equip the stations is also considered. Establishing a legal advisor (in the absence of any real regulations and in the genesis of a legislation on the question) and a support center in Ramallah are also part of the objectives.

The objective is also to create a network of these stations with the help of collective training and producing joint programmes, dealing with subjects such as social and democratic matters and human rights, in the aim to put all the means together and strengthen the installation across the territory.

Lastly, the need to select ten journalists for the stations, offer them a valid training course for one year, employ them for collective, supervised productions and pay them a wage for one year, maintaining their position within the station. The objective is to create an “elite group of reporters” so that they in turn can train other reporters for their station, improving the quality of news broadcasts and to form an association of journalists.

Considering that the Amin team are exceptionally familiar with the subject, that they understand the risks involved and the requirements of the local Palestinian radio stations, as they do the political and economical situation, the project, as defined by Amin Internews and Internews Europe perfectly meets the Palestinian stations needs, and on a bigger scale the necessity to develop in Palestine a network of radio stations that offer multiple non biased local news, involving democratic opportunities as well as promoting Human Rights.

Putting the project into operation happened at a time that was loaded with complicated political events, which made it impossible to predict when the objectives might be attained. However despite the obstacles, Amin Internews and Internews Europe managed to keep working on the project without losing track of their main objectives that were accomplished all in all to a satisfactory degree.

Nothing is ever definitely acquired, and the situation makes the outcome over time even more unpredictable. But for now they are solid enough to resist any new political developments. As from now, without any doubt they can play a positive role in the way Palestinians envisage their future. Further on we will see that the pursuit of this project will probably be very decisive in that way.

2. Efficiency

A healthy administration

Throughout our mission, we got to meet everybody involved in the project, the beneficiaries as well as the media viewers and civilians. They all emphasized the seriousness of what Amin Internews were undertaking.

We were also allowed access to their accounts concerning the project, and didn't notice any disproportion, or any doubtful budget line. The lifestyle of the organization, and its participants is reasonable, and its administration meticulous and transparent.

The course of action which tends to be a mixture of training courses in Ramallah and "in house", technical support, legal support, the network support and material or financial help is proving to be efficient, taking into account the situation of Palestinian radio stations and the need to improve each of these matters at the same time.

Dealing with matters within a certain time limit.

Admittedly there were delays at the start, but the political and economical instability of the country, as well as traveling difficulties make it difficult to work on such a big project at a normal rhythm sticking to the agenda to the hour. It's necessary to constantly recompose, find solutions for last minute hitches, and humor their touchy beneficiaries. Being too pushy would have lead to failure. Amin chose to negotiate patiently, using a step-by-step political approach. It proved to be an effective move. It caused a late designation of some of the local reporters and a delay in the delivery of equipment for the stations. A regrettable but unavoidable consequence considering the Palestinian situation.

The late designation of the resident advisor and the difficulties encountered by him to fully fulfill his position whilst navigating between the two partnerships, Amin Internews and Internews Europe must be noted.

The number of radio stations associated to the project was higher than expected but in the end the steadfastness of the most eager, the disengagement of the more skeptical plus the difficulty to work in Gaza made for a kind of "natural selection" that reduced the number of genuine partner radio stations to the the initial objective.

Finally, if the need for help with technical equipment proved to be essential in order to develop and improve the quality on the air and the quality of the programmes broadcasted by the Palestinian stations, the Amin strategy that consisted of delaying the delivery of equipment until the end of the project, despite being understandable, slightly unsettled the motivation of certain beneficiaries.

3. Effectiveness

A difficult situation

The objective conditions of setting up the project “The support and networking of local radio stations in Palestine” were very specific. If indeed they justified the commitment of Internews and the EU to the idea, incidents concerning the conflictive Israeli-Palestinian situation and the electoral victory of Hamas considerably modified its debut.

In these circumstances, we can guarantee that the project, in terms of its effectiveness, is a success.

An effective strategy

Choosing to set up a project whose operator would be a Palestinian ONG is the best strategical choice. The complex terrain, the connections, and certain defiance with regards to the international community require a good knowledge of the Palestinian terrain and the countries cultural codes. What’s more, the integrity, discipline, competence and commitment of the Amin staff during the set up of the project are undeniable. Their interest in the project, and their consciousness of the risks involved are unquestionably up to the measure of the commitment. It must be highlighted that the directors of Amin are renowned professional journalists, and that they were able to surround themselves with fellow Palestinian journalists and foreign correspondents- of quality. Lastly the installation of a training and resource center in Ramallah, a geographical, economical and politically central position in Cisjordanie, widely favoured the projects effectiveness and its development.

Useful and indispensable training

Tests that were taken at the end of various training courses were encouraging. Most of the trainees thought that the classes fulfilled their objectives, and that they felt ready to put to use what they had learned. We could tell that the trainees were very satisfied with the various courses: on the whole the training courses covered everything that was expected.

We have received many accounts testifying that people that followed a training course notably improved at work. Dealing with local news, producing newspapers, working as a network, are some of the most significant improvements. According to a number of people directing radio stations, the quality of presentations on the air has improved. If one of the most noticeable differences seems to be fewer repeats of Al Jazeera on the air, it’s thanks to the presenter’s capacity to stay on the air. The main effect the on the air training has had is without a doubt the growing amount of “local information”, whether in news broadcasts or other programmes.

High quality productions, in particular regarding Human Rights and Democracy.

This understanding of local news, this capacity to detect and hold an interest for people’s everyday life and then to broadcast the information is key elements in the local stations successful results. Efforts have been made in this direction. In particular programmes produced by local reporters, supervised by the staff at the Amin headquarters at Ramallah, are undeniably a valuable example and consequently instructive. Largely made up of the local reporters work, the magazines produced by Amin are the result of a joint work effort by journalists from different stations associated with the project. Whether it’s the coverage of the presidential elections on the 9th January 2005 or

the many magazines abording subjects susceptible to interest Palestinian society, each programme finalized and validated in the Ramallah studios, was then at the disposal of partner radio stations and then broadcast by different Palestinian stations.

These programmes had a real impact on improving the quality of Palestinian radio stations. In all, fifty programmes were produced by Amin and broadcast on the radio between April 2005 and December 2006, the themes directly concerning civilian society and often with reference to democratic values, human rights, women's rights, non violence, living conditions and the problems of Palestinian society." We have learnt how to talk about taboo subjects", said one of our contacts. In fact: homosexuality, honor crimes, child rape, civil weddings, all of these things was approached when it would have been unthinkable in the past.

A resource center

The heart of the Amin activity is at the Ramallah Resource center. Its location and the numerous training courses provided there have had an obvious influence in its development and its growing efficacy.

A resource center associated with a training center, by and for the local beneficiary stations: such is the originality and efficacy of the Amin Resource Center in Ramallah. Journalists can find the necessary equipment to complete their individual or collective projects, as well as resource people capable of helping them, giving them advice, with their current work. During our visit we discovered a dynamic center, and noticed how the Palestinian journalists found a meeting place there, where they could exchange ideas, where they could work and learn. Often the equipment they used at the center wasn't available at their station, and the advice received by the Amin team was precious and necessary.

The legal advisor

In a indistinct legal and political situation, Amin decided to assist the stations in their approach to certain authorities. That is why the decision was taken to adopt the services of a legal advisor. But it's difficult to get an exact idea of just how much he's helping the project. More or less absent from the training courses, he managed to negotiate a 50% reduction for the cost of the radio frequency licenses. This agreement was signed with the Palestinian authorities during the last days when Fatah were in government and the Hamas had already won the elections. It has never been applied and so the payment of the licenses never took place. What's more, considering the fact that the Palestinian authorities have been paralyzed since the last elections, that the minister of communication was in Gaza and belonged to the Hamas, apparently restrained the legal advisor from pushing the file concerning the legislation and regulations for the FM band.

Even if the legal advisor's role remains negligible, we mustn't conclude that the projects main objectives, the quality of coverage concerning democracy, social reforms, equality of the sexes and children's rights was not promoted. These topics, very present in each radio station's programmes and notably programmes produced by local reporters are the result of specific and serious work and the need to maintain these topics present on the local radio programmes is widely felt.

4. Impact

Difficult circumstances

The journalists confirming that it is difficult to work in Palestine are numerous. But if they continue their work it's because they feel it's vital for the future of their country. The electoral victory of the Hamas affected the freedom of expression. The religious influence has a real effect on the local radio's team workers. Direct threats are received. Then again, Fatah militants also threaten certain stations now and again. In short, to work as an informant through the difficult conditions of Israeli occupation is to be a constant target for threats. Quite often on these radios the limits of freedom of expression are exposed, but at the same time the desire to continue the effort to promote quality news and debates.

In these circumstances, it appears very encouraging to us to notice a sincere willingness to gain and keep the freedom of expression considered as a proof of progress. **In this regard the projects influence in gaining this awareness is undeniable.** We noticed a real loyalty to these values inside the contents of many programmes broadcasted by the stations linked to the project. The will to become open-minded is strong and the project beneficiaries testify that important changes have been made in the diversity of topics, and especially those concerning Human rights, social matters and society. The local radios realize that any progress made for Human Rights and democracy is not only necessary for their own development but also an objective that they can help to obtain. The project is without a doubt to be thanked for the permanent broadcasting of programmes promoting human rights and democracy. This is not one of its lesser successes.

Civil society

In Palestinian society there is no association or group representative of "civilian society" that we could have counted on to give us their opinion on the local radios.

We were, however, able to evaluate the impact made by local radio stations during our various travels in the course of informal conversations: taxi drivers, bus drivers, hotel receptionists, shop owners, various contacts, international organizations, journalists.... The local radios have a real impact; a lot of listeners and the Palestinians expect them to be professional. Quality is what is demanded, the listeners will not make do any more with half measures or amateurism. This signifies that the local radios are headed for becoming the majority, despite the fact that their technical level remains that of a handyman. The expectations of the civilian society are high. **The answers given nowadays by Amin and the project are heading in the right direction when concerned with Human rights.**

Example:

The Palestinian Independent Commission for Citizen's Rights acts in various ways to familiarize people with and promote Human Rights in Palestine. They work together with Amin Internews in order to create training sessions intended for various radio teams participating in the project. The aim is to ensure a structured and regular presence on matters concerning Human Rights broadcast by all stations.

The PICCR directly sends press releases to the stations when newsbreaks occur, and "the comeback is abundant". Phone calls to get more information or more details, but also interviews with the directors of PICCR. According to this organization, there is an undeniable improvement: a few years before, no radio station, except one, would have accepted to take the organization's press releases. According to them it's a very important change. The PICCR would like to pursue the work they have begun with Amin.

5. Durability

The Amin /Internews team and Internews Europe have worked consistently and seriously. The result provides a good foundation for the main radio stations linked to the project. Taking that into consideration, it would seem important to find the means to pursue the work instigated three years previously, but only really functional these last two years.

It's an ambitious project, useful and effective. It's a project that needs time to develop within a considerably difficult and complicated political and economical environment. Despite the significant progress that's been made, it's still not fully accomplished.

It will take a few more years for the private Palestinian stations to become fully professional and for them to be well established on their home ground. However, we must stress that it has helped develop moral standards, a certain way of handling news and in particular information concerning Human Rights and democracy, in a clear manner free of taboos. To talk of long-term results would be too optimistic. But it has made it possible to sow the seeds for a new way to handle news, in an impressive and trustworthy way. The end result will depend on how the project is followed up and the political evolution.

6. Recommendations

Where are the priorities that will allow the project to develop?

Training the journalists must be continued, enrollment in more actual courses, initiating them in moral standards and ethical values. Our suggestion is the creation of a “workbook”, given to trainees when they apply for their first course. This book, tracking the training experience of the owner could represent an interesting synopsis for their professional insertion. The idea to install an alternative training course, as exists in France with professional contracts, would have the merit of training the journalists all the way through the course and stabilizing them in their radio station. Therefore the trainee would work for his station for two years, after which he would have gained a lot of experience and real professional qualities.

We think it's for the best to reconsider the number of stations linked to the project. In fact as we mentioned previously, Amin Internews privileged less stations than initially planned, limiting themselves to 12 to 15 stations. Concentrating all efforts on these stations meant a better quality of intervention.

This could lead to these radio stations becoming examples in their sphere of listeners, and also spilling over to other stations.

It's necessary to continue financing the network of local reporters: it's an important support for the stations, which oversee the network and keep the stations journalistic level high. The more dynamic and motivated local reporters should be trained to teach others, to broaden their capacities to pass on the knowledge they themselves have acquired.

Already started by the project, the improvement of the technical equipment, from the studio to the transmitter and aerial must continue. The inventory of the equipment and needs has been completed, a first “urgent” delivery made, now the need is to find a new intermediary to buy more equipment. A kind of co-op for the purchase of equipment could be created. But technical progress will never happen without training technicians capable of ensuring the maintenance of the radio stations and notably the transmitters. It would mean putting together a small group of resource personnel for all the private Palestinian stations, under the leadership of Amin Internews.

The resource center in Ramallah needs to be improved. More records should be assembled, not only by increasing the instruction manuals, courses, written documents in both Arabic and English, but also by establishing a collection of audio archives. The center should remain the center of the growing network of Palestinian radio stations, in terms of training, production and collaboration. It can favor the creation of an authoritative federation of radios capable of working together on common projects and speaking as one before their supervising authorities. Amin, considering their aura, could well be the instigator of such a federation.

In conclusion the cooperation between Amin Internews and Internews Europe must be maintained without a doubt. Internews Europe, who has nothing to prove in regarding their international experience, remains a fundamental relay and associate. Amin Internews have acquired a “savoir faire”, experience, and knowledge of the terrain, which all together are essential for the continuation, and success of the project.