Rural and remote communities in Lao PDR, particularly those with significant populations from ethnic minority groups, have very little access to reliable information. With information typically shared top-down, and in the national language only, these communities face several challenges in accessing information relevant to them in their local language; moreover, limited infrastructure makes these communities even harder to reach. All this results in development indicators that frequently are well below those found in other parts of the country.

Amid these challenges, UNDP has been instrumental in helping to mobilize communities in Lao PDR to address the situation, using community radio to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized people and providing them with important information with regard to access to public services, food security and nutrition, agriculture, health care, education, gender equality, and other critical development topics. The Community Participation and Communications Support Programme of the Government and UNDP, known locally as the Community Radio Programme, has introduced culturally relevant programming and encourages creativity and civic engagement.

As a result, this innovative approach – unique because civil society as a whole remains nascent in Lao PDR – has provided an unprecedented opportunity for remote and rural communities to make their voices heard. In so doing, it offers additional information to that provided in the State-run media, the only other form of mass communication, and has provided an important impetus to help Lao PDR meet its ambition of graduating from Least Developed Country status by 2020.

Eight community radio stations now reach more than 285,000 people – a notable figure in a country of fewer than 7 million. The stations operate in remote areas of the south (Sekong and Saravane Provinces), the North (Xieng Khouang Province), the northeast (Oudomxay Province) and the northwest of the country (Saiyabouli Province). All districts for establishment of the stations are selected based on agreed criteria, including poverty rate and remoteness. All initiatives also are designed around the end users, even when they are very difficult to reach.

Although the scale of this groundbreaking initiative has been comparatively small, the impact and reach to the poorest communities has been large. Impact studies of one pilot station, for example, showed that...
Key areas of benefit to listeners through community radio programs

information broadcast in ethnic languages about health and education had a direct and positive effect on vaccination rates, which showed a 50 percent increase, and the number of women using health facilities during pregnancy, which rose by 70 percent. In addition, citizens were encouraged to participate in democratic processes through sharing of information about the dates and venues of local elections for village chiefs. This ultimately illustrated the programme’s potential as a tool for sustainable community development. A listeners’ survey conducted in 2014 further showed the usefulness of this tool from a community perspective. A very large majority of community radio listeners across districts where these stations operate (97% from Khoun District, 96% in Nonghed District and 91% in Thateng District) reported that they have benefited from the radio programmes. For example, the diagram below from Khoun Community Radio Station indicates that listeners have particularly benefited from agriculture, health and general information programmes.

Based on these impressive results, a mid-term evaluation in 2014 recommended scaling up the programme, which was financially supported by UNDP’s Scaling Up Fund. As a result, replication began and three of the stations were established, enabling an additional 100,000 people to tune into community radio station broadcasts in their own languages. The potential exists for even further expansion, with the Government recognizing the merit of ensuring that more communities in other districts are able to access the benefits of grassroots and localized media.

A deepened partnership with civil society has proven indispensable to the success and sustainability of this scaling-up effort, with a network of volunteers playing a key role in allowing the radio stations to broadcast and spread to six provinces. A total of 268 local volunteers, of which 113 are women, are training even more volunteers on the use and management of community radios, while also educating and raising awareness among their communities on fundamental development issues. Critically, the volunteers also act as community mobilizers in their villages, identifying relevant topics emerging from community discussions and adding them to the broadcasting content. Several inspiring stories of volunteers themselves also have been documented.

The programme also has developed successful partnerships with the private sector, local governments and other international organizations, some of which are covering running costs. For example, five stations have partnered with Lao Telecom, a private company, for the provision of telecom equipment that is helping them to save significant resources. One local government is sharing all operating costs for its community radio station, while another’s water utility bill is covered by its district government office. Two other stations have partnered with the World Bank to cover operating costs and content production. Four stations have partnered with the non-Government organization Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) to raise awareness on unexploded ordnance (UXO), which remains a major issue in Lao PDR, and to develop mine risk education programmes. These various forms of partnership are expected to significantly enhance the gradual empowerment and autonomy of community radio as a whole.

Beyond UNDP, other United Nations Agencies are beginning to cooperate and collaborate in the community radio effort as well, representing a different but equally important type of scaling up – one with a focus on a holistic set of issues for people frequently left out of development benefits. Since March 2015, for example, an educational radio programme on nutrition and food production practices has been jointly developed, by UNICEF, the International Fund for Agriculture and Development (IFAD) and UNDP, and broadcast through four of the stations in three provinces, with an estimated audience size of about 170,000 people. Broadcasts are in the three main ethnic minority language of Laoloum, Hmong and Khmu, and community feedback indicates that interested listeners, particularly women, are starting to call in with questions about such issues as nutrition during pregnancy and nutrition for young children.

In the coming months, this radio programme also will benefit from joint collaboration with other development agencies such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the International Organization for Migration, with relevant programmes expected on issues of migration and human trafficking. United Nations Volunteers also is providing additional funds of US$150,000 in 2016.