



**UCLG**  
Committee

Social Inclusion  
Participatory Democracy  
and Human Rights

**Inclusive Cities  
Observatory**

## « RADIO SIGIDA JOLI: BUILDING COMMUNITY »

Bamako, Mali

*Period of implementation: 2009 to 2011 | Study case written in 2010*

**R**adio Sigida Joli seeks to create a space for community dialogue, leadership development, and collaboration through biweekly radio segments and, more recently, listeners' groups. The program targets Sikoro, a peri-urban community on the outskirts of Bamako, although content is relevant to all peri-urban dwellers and the show's one million listeners are from around the country. Slum communities like Sikoro face political, social, and economic marginalization, Political structures are less responsive to Sikoro as fewer residents vote or pay taxes. Within this context, Radio Sigida Joli aims to increase civil society solutions to pressing social problems, improve communication and accountability between slums and their governments, and help individuals exercise their rights. The primary targets of the program are women and youth, although listeners of diverse backgrounds enjoy the show. The launch of six listeners' groups, focused on youth, seeks to facilitate greater collective action following discussions on the show with training on participatory analysis and project planning.



The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** was launched in 2008 by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights with the aim of creating a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. The initiative was developed with the scientific support of Professor Yves Cabannes (University College of London) and the Centre for Social Studies (CES) from the University of Coimbra. At present, the Observatory contains more than sixty study cases mostly developed between 2008 and 2010. Even though many of these cases refer to policies that have already come to an end, they still have much to offer: from capitalizing on the learning acquired by other local authorities to discovering suggestive and alternative means to address social inclusion challenges from a local perspective.

## Context

### *City context*

Despite a relatively modest population of 1.8 million, Bamako, Mali is the fastest growing city in Africa (UN-IRIN). With high birth rates, rural migration, and immigration from neighboring countries, Bamako lacks an infrastructure capable of supporting a burgeoning population. Overall, 93% of Mali's urban population lives in slums, characterized by limited access to water, sanitation systems, durable housing, and land rights (UN-HABITAT 2003).

Government investments in basic services and infrastructure in slums are limited. As few slum residents pay taxes or vote, there is little incentive for government officials at any level to focus on slum needs. At the same time, many slum residents cite the lack of government investment in their communities as the primary reason that they fail to vote or pay taxes.

Radio Sigida Joli is focused on Sikoro, a slum located on the northeast outskirts of Bamako. While a 2004 census estimated the population at 26,000, as of 2011 local associations and residents claim the population is likely 3 or 4 times larger depending on the definition of community lines. In recent years, population growth has skyrocketed. While the native population can be traced back to a small group of families, rural families have increasingly moved to Sikoro seeking access to greater economic opportunities in the city.

Job opportunities are limited in Sikoro, which has a 26.5% unemployment rate. Few residents have salaried jobs; most who do work participate in small commerce or trades such as metal or woodworking. Only 40% of the population has received formal schooling, with 15% of the population achieving functional literacy. A survey conducted by a local association found the average individual earns approximately 150 euro a year (Club d'Amis de Mekin-Sikoro 2010).

Infrastructure grew significantly in the last two decades although it has failed to keep pace with the needs of the growing population. Today, Sikoro has two schools, two health centers, and five water stations that provide potable water. Electricity was only introduced in the recent decade. The community lacks paved roads and full sanitation services. Many families live up to 4 km away from potable water, and financial barriers inhibit access to education and healthcare.

Like many peri-urban communities in Mali, Sikoro has a dual system of governance: the systems under the elected Malian government and the traditional *chefferie*. The elected government is primarily decentralized, as described below, while the local *chefferie* functions as a more centralized chief-led system with sub-chiefs responsible for different subsectors.

### *Decentralization context*

Mali was under French rule from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1960. The colonial system functioned as a system of direct rule, under which state structures were designed to extract resources rather than work with and respond to the demands of local residents. Following a bloodless coup in 1991, Mali faced the challenge of how to transition into a democratic system of civilian rule after more than two decades of corrupt authoritarianism. Democratic decentralization, or the relocation of power and decision-making to local levels of government, was heralded as a means to achieve local government responsiveness and accountability to the citizenry (Hellevik 2004).

Initial efforts towards decentralization focused on a transfer of power to decentralized structures to facilitate development and a redefinition of local and national institutions in

conjunction with the interests of the population (Rawson 2000). The push for decentralization aimed, in large part, to gain legitimacy for the state. Altogether, decentralization was driven by a top-down vision of 'new politics' following the end of dictatorial regime.

Today Mali consists of 8 distinct regions and 409 municipalities. Despite impressive gains, the depth of Mali's democratic decentralization remains questionable. Despite the devolution of power, few financial resources for services or government functioning have been devolved, and a lack of a qualified personnel make it difficult for local governments to fulfill their goals. Perhaps most important is the challenge of participation. With voting rates below 35%, much of the Malian citizenry remains inactive in political and civic spheres (Economist Intelligence Unit 2008). One study reports that 64% of Malians declare themselves 'not interested' in politics and government, and argues that the gap between government and citizens arises in part from 'a passive citizenry that puts few pressures on its leaders' (Bratton et al. 2000).

Such passivity is intricately linked with poverty; as poor constituents are significantly less likely to contact government leaders (Bratton et al. 2000). In slums like Sikoro, a lack of solid citizen-government relations has perpetuated poverty and left a governance vacuum (UN-HABITAT 2003). The disconnection between government and slum residents is a growing problem, where years of corruption have left most residents cynical of government intentions (USAID 2002). Governments fail to provide services because slum residents do not vote or pay taxes.

Santosh Mehrotra (2006) argues that in order to reap the benefits of decentralization, it is necessary to have a 'collective voice articulated by civil society through institutions enabled by the state'. While a skeleton of democracy has been established in Mali, the 'demand side' is irresolute and the presence of a civil society is lacking. Togola & Gerber (2007) find that Malian civil society falters on two key levels: (i) As a *partner* with government in development and in promoting an understanding of decentralization, and (ii) as a *watchdog* of the government.

### Social context

In considering the 'demand' side of decentralization, Sikoro has seen significant growth since the early 1990s but still has a long way to go in developing participatory processes. Most notable is the growth and development of numerous civil society groups. Over a third of Sikoro residents claim to participate in one or more associations. Women's groups meet regularly to produce goods for sale or create personal savings groups. A total of 47% of the Sikoro population is under the age of 15, and Sikoro's youth groups function as a space for youth (primarily young men) to play sports and mobilize (Club d'Amis de Mekin-Sikoro 2010). Development-focused groups also target specific issues in the community ranging from access to clean water to sanitation. Several groups have accessed foreign funders, which have provided an influx of resources for different initiatives. In interviews many residents cite a significant shift towards a sense of community and local engagement, particularly among the youth who play an increasingly important role in local politics and development (Mali Health Organizing Project 2008). At the same time, most residents have little knowledge of their rights or how to exercise them, and lack a sense of control over their political fate (Mali Health Organizing Project 2008).

### Policy development

Radio Sigida Joli grew out of a concern for fostering greater civic engagement and community participation in local development, health, and governance in Sikoro. Launched in April 2009, the program seeks to provide residents with a viable platform for dialogue and problem solving around local development, basic services, and governance. A specific emphasis is placed on

health education, services, and systems. The show is aired twice a week in the dominant local language, Bambara, on one of Bamako's most popular radio stations, Radio Djekafo.

Two radio announcers, both from the Sikoro community, cover topics ranging from malaria prevention to the rights and responsibilities of citizens. The topics are selected by the announcers and MHOP's Communication Coordinator, with input from local residents and associations. In 2011, the show introduced a listeners' groups component, whereby groups of youth meet weekly to listen and discuss the show. While the primary target group of the show is the Sikoro community, the content remains relevant to all peri-urban neighborhoods, and listeners phone in from around the country. As of 2011, listenership is estimated at one million.

### *Background*

Radio Sigida Joli is a project of the Mali Health Organizing Project (MHOP). Founded in 2006 by U.S. students in partnership with Sikoro residents, MHOP seeks to empower Sikoro citizens to improve health outcomes, specifically by fostering the agency of residents and community structures to mobilize around service needs. Other MHOP programs include a community-led health clinic, action training for local residents and associations, and a program whereby poor families receive free health care for children in exchange for parental participation in community health projects such as malnutrition campaigns and trash clean-up days. MHOP regards health as a byproduct of an active and engaged citizenry, and while short-term measures of success focus on health outcomes, long-term goals focus on community mobilization, leadership, and government partnerships as critical foundations for change. This is particularly relevant in Mali, where the most basic unit of the health system – clinics – are run by elected community committees, which require community inputs to maintain accountability and management.

Radio Sigida Joli originated as a response to a need for inclusive dialogue and discussion on a community-wide level around local concerns and a consideration of the opportunity offered by radio to function as a tool for mobilization. While most of the Sikoro population lacks access to newspapers, 90% listen to the radio on a regular basis (MHOP 2010). USAID Mali points out: '[Radio] increases the effectiveness of African institutions in promoting a vibrant private sector and democratic governance by bolstering media organizations and involving local institutions, NGOs and companies in the implementation of its activities.' Moreover, Mali's broadcasts are some of the freest in Africa, and widespread national and regional radio programs have already had great success in targeting government transparency and corruption on the national level (Committee to Protect Journalists). MHOP saw radio as a unique tool through which to give voice to an otherwise marginalized community while facilitating communication and accountability between residents and government officials.

### *Policy goals*

Radio Sigida Joli aims to increase civil society solutions to pressing social problems, improve communication and accountability between slums and their governments, and help individuals exercise their rights.

### *Chronological development and implementation*

Following the recruitment of a local project coordinator in 2008, initial research focused on creating a pilot around six pre-recorded shows. Focus groups were organized in nine peri-urban communities to look at the greatest challenges in each community, potential solutions, relationships between citizens and government officials, attitudes towards taxes, knowledge of citizen rights, evidence of civic engagement, and potential interest in a related radio program.

Eighty percent of those interviewed about their relationships with their local elected officials asserted that they did not trust them or they do not know who they are, while 60% were unaware of their rights. While the groups indicated considerable variation in people's level of civic engagement, nearly all expressed interest in listening to a program focused on their rights, responsibilities, neighborhood development, and relationships with elected officials.

Radio Djekafo was selected as the station on which to air the program based on its popularity among interviewees, nonpartisanship, availability, and cost. The pilot was extended from six shows to a year-long contract based on feedback that listenership takes significant time to develop. Interviews were also conducted with members of the public service in Sikoro and elected representatives of the mayor's office. These showed that the mayor's office representatives and the residents of the towns had roughly the same ideas about why the divide exists: most cite corruption and 'false promises' as the cause. The representatives of the mayor's office indicated that it should be the role of the chief of the village to act as a bridge between the two groups. They also said that the fierce political battles in the area prohibit honesty: in order to be elected, you must promise the world, but then there is no way with the limited budget available that even the best leader can follow through on these promises.

Discussions with other community radio experts and advisors also pointed to serious downsides to pre-recording, despite the benefit of better sound quality. Community radio programs are often 'hijacked' by the NGOs or the corporate sponsors promoting them. Also, because pre-recorded radio programs require a script and literate hosts, they often did not reflect true community needs or desires. It was thus determined that live radio would better meet the project's goals, and that all the content should be in Bambara (the vernacular language) rather than French (the national language). A Sikoro-based Community Health Action Group would be responsible for advising on topics and providing ongoing program feedback, while local announcers would work with the project coordinator to plan content. Two announcers, one male and one female, were selected following a call for applicants from Sikoro.

Emissions began in April 2009, airing a single show twice a week for 20 minutes. The show time was extended to 30 minutes in August 2009, and then to 45 minutes in January 2011, based on feedback from the announcers. Shows cycled through thematic series such as rights and responsibilities of citizens, community health centers, and sanitation systems. Of the 76 shows aired up to December 2010, 36 focused on health education, 20 on governance, and 20 on community conflict resolution and human rights. Examples included the importance of birth certificates for children and government conflict over their distribution, the role of individuals in the effective management of local clinics, the role of government and private partners in waste management, malaria prevention on the community level, and the reason for taxes and ways to ensure proper utilization of community funds. Many shows focus on identifying a challenge in the community, analyzing its causes, and focusing on potential solutions.

Content for shows comes from interviews with local politicians, service providers, and citizens, and a call-in line allows listeners to contribute to the dialogue. Several series focused on organizing for specific community action: in one example, the mayor attempted to sell public land designated for a clinic for private gain. Following a special radio series, the land was returned to its public status. In another case, callers reported illegal dumping in a local stream blocking the water flow and causing flooding and waterborne illness. The show facilitated a discussion involving families affected, the mayor's office, and several youth associations, ultimately organizing a series of trash clean-up days to remove the debris. The mayor's office and the chief of the village implemented a heavy fine to prevent ongoing dumping.

In the fall of 2010, plans began to design listeners' groups targeting youth, in part to create a feedback loop for improving the show, but largely to provide a designated space for youth to meet to listen to the show and then discuss the issues raised. Youth interested in further involvement would have the opportunity to join in MHOP's Training series, which includes a set of activities for community members that builds competencies in participatory analysis, project and campaign planning, communication for mobilization, and maximizing existing assets.

### *Stakeholders, beneficiaries and participatory methodologies*

In its initial stages, the program benefited significantly from the expertise of other Mali-based organizations working in the areas of radio and governance. Top advisors included staff from FIRE (*Formation interactif d'éducateurs par la radio*) and the Program for Shared Governance. FIRE runs radio shows providing interactive training for educators across Mali, while the Program for Shared Governance, a project by USAID, works to develop local governance capacity to strengthen decentralization while also training local civil society groups. Other advisors on best practices included the *Comité Technique de Radio*, URTEL (the national network of telecommunications stations), Radio Djekafo, and World Connections.

A number of local partners advised on the content and goals of the program. These included the mayor's office of Commune 1 of Bamako, the *Centre de Santé de Référence* (reference hospital) of Commune 1, and the local *chefferie*. Prominent local associations in Sikoro were also consulted. This included Club d'Amis de Mekin-Sikoro, a youth group focused on education, sanitation, and local development; the GIEs, an association of private trash collectors; youth groups; and MHOP's Community Health Action Group.

The primary beneficiaries of the program are Sikoro residents. However, the content is relevant to all peri-urban communities and callers phone in from across the country and occasionally abroad. Infostat, the only organization that measures listenership for radio shows in Mali, estimated one million listeners for the program in early 2011, up from 90,000 in early 2010. The exact number of listeners in Sikoro is unknown, although in a randomized survey conducted in 2010, 60% of residents interviewed said they listened to the show at least once per week.

Radio Sigida Joli primarily targets youth and women, although the show remains relevant for all groups. Providing space for youth to engage in dialogue was identified as key in focus groups as they currently exist as a rising political and social force in Mali. For women, radio provides an opportunity to partake in discussions from which they may traditionally be excluded.

A diverse array of individuals and groups have been involved in the show since its launch, including citizens from Sikoro and other peri-urban communities, government representatives, and civil society groups. While the show focuses on Sikoro, issues from other communities are often raised and discussed. Living in Sikoro is not a prerequisite for benefiting from the show, as the problems raised are typically common among different communities. In some cases, people are freer to discuss such problems in the context of a community other than their own.

As a Malian-American organization, MHOP continues to provide office space, financing, and strategic oversight for Radio Sigida Joli. However, the content of Radio Sigida Joli is largely run by the Sikoro community for the Sikoro community. While the project coordinator lives in a different part of Bamako, both announcers are current Sikoro residents, and increasingly, Sikoro leaders. The process by which show topics are selected is largely participatory, as announcers consult different residents, community groups, and local government to identify issues that are locally relevant. The flexibility of the show also allows it to respond quickly to issues as they are raised, and the large portion of the show dedicated to listeners' calls provides a literal platform through which marginalized communities can broadcast their ideas and views.

An organizational strategic planning process in the fall of 2011 was designed around input from community focus groups and interviews with residents. A two-year strategic plan focuses on better integrating Radio Sigida Joli with other MHOP programs, such as Action Training and public health campaigns, while also deepening its impact through community activities. New elements of the show – including the listeners’ groups – are designed to create a physical space in which youth can continue and amplify the discussions launched by the show. While listener groups are still in a pilot phase, they have already received support and interest from residents. In the long-term, MHOP envisions the groups as a space for youth to exercise leadership and facilitation skills and become involved in community planning, development and governance.

Several suggestions for improving the show and encouraging greater participation arose during a recent survey. These included more discussions about the roles and responsibilities of local councilors, greater youth involvement, expansion of the show to other stations, and extended broadcast time. Respondents also emphasized the importance of purchasing a free call-in line, as purchasing pre-paid phone credit can inhibit some callers. A comprehensive evaluation of the program is scheduled for late 2011 and will provide more robust information on the efficacy and impact of the current program as well as opportunities for further development.

### *Institutionalization and financing*

As of March 2011, Radio Sigida Joli exists as an operational project, financed and run through MHOP. Pending financial support, the organization hopes to expand the program to other stations, extend its airtime, and offer greater support for listeners’ projects in the coming years.

Program costs for Radio Sigida Joli through 2010 were approximately U.S.\$19,000. The program is currently funded through MHOP by private donors who are predominantly U.S.-based, as well as the Working Partners Foundation International. The Huntington Public Service Award provided start-up funding through MHOP’s Executive Director. Much of the labor involved in the program is donated. Announcers receive a small stipend to cover their costs but are otherwise volunteers, and community activities do not provide per diems.

## **Outcomes and reflections**

### *Key results and achievements*

Measuring the impact of Radio Sigida Joli was challenging. Indicators of success include a widespread listenership countrywide and particularly within Sikoro, as well as anecdotal actions taken by community members to address problems discussed on the show. In surveys, residents provided positive feedback and constructive proposals for improving the program, and a more comprehensive evaluation will be conducted in 2011 with a larger survey and focus groups.

According to the most recent survey, 90% of respondents said the program was a way for them to see and act differently about the community. The greatest contrast with pre-program surveys and focus groups was in regards to attitudes towards taxes and voting. In pre-program surveys, voting was considered unimportant and many people had not even heard of taxes. Two years later, respondents were significantly more likely to be able to explain the relevance of voting to their own lives and identify paying taxes as a civic duty. Testimonials from the survey claimed the program provided more knowledge about the rights and duties of the community, provided strong reasons to pay taxes, encouraged men to value health more and understand how to prevent common diseases, improved critical thinking and ways of looking at community issues, and gave more hope for communal development. It should be noted, however, that the small sample size of the survey creates certain limitations on interpretation of the data.

## *Main obstacles faced*

In addition to funding limitations, one of the greatest challenges in executing the program has been maintaining a balance between calling for government accountability while also fostering government–community collaboration. Highlighting specific instances of corruption is a critical way to pressure for change; however, it also endangers possibilities for future partnerships with individuals involved. Decisions to do so have to be weighed carefully by the radio team as they consider long-term implications for the potential to collaborate. This has perhaps proven most relevant in regards to the local *chefferie*, as they are non-elected officials and in some cases hold lifetime positions. While there has yet to be an issue that the team consciously decided not to address, sensitive topics do have to be discussed carefully.

In the case of the local elected government, the radio team also has to consciously work to not give off an impression of being ‘anti-government’. Framing problems of accountability within the government as issues that can in fact change is critical to promoting collaboration, and callers do occasionally go on anti-government tirades. Government officials are aware of the high risks for criticism, and fears of denigration make it harder to get officials to agree to go on the air. In a series seeking to speak with all five of the mayor’s adjuncts for basic services, the majority refused to be interviewed. A number of officials dedicated to local development and increased government responsiveness have taken advantage of the radio to further progress towards those goals. The enthusiasm of certain individuals has been very valuable.

The program has had to make compromises in order to reach a certain level of participation from local government. During the early months of the show, the radio team sought to organize semi-annual public gatherings directly in Sikoro where citizens can interact directly with local government officials. Originally these were envisioned as an opportunity for the local government to present the budget, which is legally supposed to be made public. To date, the radio team has been unable to get a copy of the budget or agreement from officials to attend such an event. In order to attract officials and build a stepping-stone towards greater communication, plans for the forum have been revised after lengthy negotiations so that government officers will respond to pre-selected questions submitted by radio listeners.

## *Replicability*

Radio Sigida Joli offers a unique opportunity for increasing civic engagement among marginalized citizens in urban areas. While a full-scale evaluation has not yet been completed, evidence currently available points to significant benefits offered by the program in increasing participation of citizens in the local governance and development process.

While various benefits of community radio have been well demonstrated in different contexts, the structure and design of Radio Sigida Joli offers several unique points. The free flowing style of the show allows it to function as an extended conversation, contributing to a natural atmosphere in which residents can participate and discuss issues relevant to their daily lives. At the same time, call-ins and live shows compromise sound quality and make it more difficult to deal with surprises (such as the absence of an expected guest). Working only with announcers from the community has allowed the show to respond to local issues, like land rights disputes or outbreaks of certain illnesses, which would not necessarily be identified by announcers coming from outside the community. It has also given unique credibility to the show within Sikoro and other peri-urban communities. At the same time, such a selection also meant working with announcers without previous experience in radio upon which to build.

Radio Sigida Joli provides a model that is replicable, but only in specific contexts. The potential and success for the program is facilitated by the fact that Mali is a functioning democracy. Political violence in Bamako is rare and while the national government does control much of the media, Malian radio is very much free and open. In a context where participants in critical conversations might face retribution, such a program would have to consider different risks.

The program is also made relevant by recent pushes for decentralization and democratization, coming in at a stage where new systems and institutions are still young. This presents a unique opportunity for such programs in fostering participation that are still very much developing. Moreover, the youth of peri-urban communities and the rapid growth they are facing also create a unique opportunity for investing in civic engagement to support increasing population numbers and to attempt to guide the development of the community in a conscious manner.

## Further information

This case was written in March 2011 by Anna Ninan, Executive Director of the Mali Health Organizing Project, under the supervision of Dr. Clemens Zobel at the Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, Portugal.

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