



How a community radio station in CAR **contributes to peace**

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DONATE

Sitting in between a Christian and a Muslim community in Bangui, the Central African Republic, Radio ESCA uses its location to foster reconciliation. After its antenna came down last year, the signal went down. Free Press Unlimited stepped in to restore Radio ESCA to the airwaves.

Emmanuel Lala explains what his radio station stands for by spelling it out.

“The E stands for Eternal, the S for Saves, the C for *Coeur* (heart in English), and the A for Africa ... The eternal saves the heart of Africa,” he says.

Lala is the director of Radio ESCA, a small Evangelical community radio station in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). Situated in between a Christian and Muslim community in the notorious KM5 neighbourhood in Bangui, Radio ESCA originally caters to a Christian audience. Half of its programming is evangelical. The other half is educational, with shows dedicated to literacy, health and news.

Still, Radio ESCA is no regular Christian radio station.

“Peace is at the centre of everything we do,” explains Lala. Radio ESCA uses its location in between two communities to broadcast peace messages to Christian and Muslim listeners alike.

Muslims trust Radio ESCA

Radio ESCA regularly welcomes Muslim listeners on air to discuss reconciliation matters. And with the signal reaching their nearby community, Muslims can tune in to the station’s thematic broadcasts on development which are relevant to audiences of any religion.

These might seem like small steps towards reconciliation, but in CAR such efforts to build trust are all-important. The situation in the country remains fragile. Fighting between predominantly Muslim Seleka rebels and majority Christian anti-balaka militias continues to fuel tensions between civilian communities.

In early February, the government and armed groups agreed on a peace deal, sparking hope. But previous similar attempts at peace were unsuccessful.

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Rights group Human Rights Watch reported that last year, thousands of people were forced to flee their homes due to fighting in some parts of the country. The report says: “Armed groups killed civilians, raped and sexually assaulted women and girls, attacked displacement camps, recruited and used children as soldiers, burned down villages, and took civilians hostage.”

“Muslims trust Radio ESCA, because they were welcomed around the church during the crisis,” says Ghislain Toundam, director of Radio Sewa, another Bangui-based radio station that aims to promote social cohesion between communities.

Toundam is talking about the crisis of 2013, when former President François Bozizé was overthrown in a coup d'état. Thousands of people took refuge on Radio ESCA's premises, which includes a church and a school. By welcoming the internally displaced people, ESCA has turned into a trusted voice in its surroundings.

Antenna down

Today, Radio ESCA is one of a number of radio stations in CAR contributing to peace and reconciliation through inclusive programming. But in late 2018, the radio station was briefly taken off air.

On October 5, Jean-Ignace Manengou, president of the Community Radio Association (ARC), posted the following on Facebook: “A big gust of wind has taken down the antenna of Radio ESCA last week. In its fall, the pylon folded itself into two pieces, and made a hole in the roof of a studio.”

Without the antenna, Radio ESCA's signal could no longer broadcast. The station went silent.

Free Press Unlimited, who has supported in 14 community radio stations in CAR since 2014, spotted the post and asked what it could do. On November 12, work to set up a new antenna started, and by November 16, the 48-metres high mast, entirely made in CAR and funded by Free Press Unlimited, was tested. The radio station has since resumed its broadcasts.

Supporting free press in CAR

Being a reporter in CAR is very difficult, according to the latest report on press freedom in the country by Freedom House. “Journalists self-censor in order to avoid intimidation and harassment,

as well as legal cases filed in response critical reporting ... Many journalists are compelled by a lack of regular pay to cover certain stories, including those promoting politicians,” the report says.

Free Press Unlimited supports ARC in strengthening its constituent radio stations, for example by funding equipment as well as providing training in journalistic professionalism and creating sustainable business models. This helps radio stations like Radio ESCA spread their messages of peace and reconciliation over the airwaves.

Radio ESCA director Lala looks back on the inauguration of the new antenna happily. It can reach even more listeners than the previous one.

“Now we can reach an audience up to 200 kilometres around us,” he says. “It was joy and happiness.”

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