Voices to the Fringes

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Radio Padma 99.20MHz, a community radio station in Rajshahi.

When the cyclone Mahasen churned up coastal Bangladesh and several districts blacked out in mid-May, six community radios across the southern coast took great care in alerting people of the cyclone's whereabouts. For five days, these radios went on air for 514 hours in total, telling people the dos and don'ts, to seek shelter and reduce damage.

During the cyclone, several organisations including weather departments provided these radio stations with area-specific information that largely contributed to minimising damage in the cyclone affected areas. Abu Sufian Shojol of Radio Nalta in Satkhira says that before the cyclone approached, his station prepared a list of shelters and aired it. "We timely aired bulletins related to weather alerts and safety of children provided by the BBC and Unicef respectively."

Amazingly, all 14 community radio stations in the country, dedicated to serve people of their respective localities, are supported by almost 500 volunteers along with its regular paid staff.

Monir Hossain Kamal, the station manager of Barguna-based Lokobetar, informs that their live radio broadcasts remained uninterrupted when Barguna blacked out the day before Mahasen struck on May 11. "We aired cautionary messages such as advising farmers to immediately harvest crops that were around 80 percent mature and directing ways to strengthen fences of vegetable plantations to minimise damage." Kamal says with confidence that despite eight deaths in Barguna due to the cyclone, no one died in the 23 unions that their radio frequency covers, implying that they had been able to guide everyone to safety.

Community radios can immensely help people, particularly farmers living in distant and isolated areas. "We regularly listen to community radio programmes and my father, a farmer, greatly benefits from these," says Foisal Sikder, a student from Pochakoralia under Amtali upazila in Barguna. Sikder thinks if all radio frequencies could reach all across the Bay of Bengal, fishermen could take advantage of this resource as well.

People in some remote areas also reaped the