

Equal Access

“Our challenge is to harness the tremendous information and communications technologies tools at our disposal to catalyze real, long term differences in the lives of the millions who need it the most”

-Equal Access website

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Introduction

With beneficiaries estimated at 45 million people, Equal Access may be one of the most successful, but also the least well-known NGOs in the world. Equal Access is an international non-profit that uses radio as a means to promote information, leadership training, skills, and community dialogue. The organization is headquartered in San Francisco and has operating programs and offices in Nepal, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos and India. Each country executes programs that utilize technology and are tailored to the specific needs and concerns of local people. As a result, Equal Access promotes a wide array programs that deal with a multitude of issues. Successful programs have the opportunity to grow and develop in new ways to reach the community with continued administrative and financial support from Equal Access. Programs may include chat shows, radio dramas, magazine shows, educational/instructional programming, leadership training, and media training. Program content is created and executed by local staff members, who have the greatest understanding of what will be the most effective way to communicate and attract the attention of local people. Local staff members receive job training from Equal Access employees and are paid a living wage.

Equal Access was founded on the belief that information and dialogue can be useful factors in alleviating poverty, promoting human rights, and thwarting HIV/AIDS. Equal Access makes important partnerships with a variety of parties including local NGOs, governments, and community leaders to generate support and funding for its radio programs. The organization receives its funding from several sources including United Nation agencies, bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies, foundations, aid agencies, and

individual donations. Equal Access hopes that its financial support will grow as the organization gains more notoriety in the NGO community.

History

Equal Access was founded in 1999 as an initiative of the State of the World Forum, the WorldSpace Corporation and the Solaria Corporation. The original intent was to combine the existing assets of the founding partners with international institutions in order to develop and deliver needed services to impoverished communities.

Ronni Goldfarb is the founder and executive director. Her background is in marketing and communications, but after several decades in the private sector, she grew discontent and wanted to contribute to humanitarian causes. She began consulting on media projects for United Nations events, which led to a close relationship with an employee at the UN Development Project. This person inspired Goldfarb to act on her vision of using radio as an educational tool in developing countries. Goldfarb had heard discussions about the “digital divide” and of third world countries being left out of the information age; she believed radio could be a tool to incorporate people living in remote areas in global discussion (R. Goldfarb, personal communication, October 11, 2007).

As Goldfarb worked to build support for her vision, she received a challenge grant from the United Nations (UN) Foundation for \$2 million to launch pilot programs in four countries: Nepal, Afghanistan, India, and Cambodia. During this time, Goldfarb looked for strategic partnerships to build the organization and raise the \$2 million needed to match the UN Foundation challenge. Michael Bosse, an Australian lawyer, took an interest in Goldfarb’s vision and helping her launch Equal Access. Bosse and Goldfarb worked together to form a collaborative, which included the World Forum, WorldSpace,

and Solaria. The World Forum agreed to provide fiscal sponsorship. WorldSpace provided satellites and inexpensive, portable digital receiver delivery infrastructure to provide radio services to remote areas. Solaria contributed solar power capabilities and entrepreneurial skills to further enable communities to access and become empowered through radio.

Originally this coalition was entitled the Equal Access Alliance, and it was based on the idea of empowering local cultures to express themselves. Focus groups were conducted in the four countries. The focus groups were critical to constructing the programming for Equal Access as they engaged communities in a ground-up process, not only identify their needs, but to ensure those needs are met. Initial pilot projects were to focus on: AIDS awareness and prevention, public health multimedia, K-12 distance learning, training programs for micro-entrepreneurs, news and information services, and emergency relief broadcasting. The goal of the initiative was to ease the delivery of data, information, and learning services throughout the developed world. The coalition has since disbanded and today, Equal Access is an independent nonprofit organization. However, the original vision and mission of Equal Access remains the same.

Mission and Vision

The mission, as stated by the organization, “is to create positive social change for large numbers of people in the developing world by providing critically needed information and educations through effective partnerships and community engagement; locally produced and targeted content; and the use of appropriate and cost-effective technology” (EA, 2007). As Ronni Goldfarb stated in a recent interview “empowering

local cultures to express themselves is something I really, really, really believe in and have since my twenties” (personal communication, October 11, 2007). The vision of Equal Access is “a world in dialogue where all voices are heard and respected” (EA, 2007). Organizational programs are designed to fulfill the mission and vision by focusing on Equal Access' core competency, listening to the specific needs of the communities being served and creating targeted, culturally appropriate information. This approach aligns with the organization's vision of enabling under-served communities to have a pivotal voice in designing solutions for their own development (personal communication, October 11, 2007). Michael Edwards (1999) might argue that Equal Access's continued success is due to the organizations clearly defined, long-term goals that they stick to over time, following too many goals at the same time causes organizations to loose their way.

Organizational Structure/Governance

Equal Access's organizational structure and governance model has matured and professionalized over the last eight years. Historically, a fairly inactive board of directors governed Equal Access. However, as the organization progressed, the need for an active board with a diverse set of skills and experiences emerged. Today, Equal Access is governed by a professional board of directors with diverse backgrounds in technology, marketing, law, and nonprofit management. Professional boards provide ongoing professional direction and shape organizational policies and program strategies (Tandon, 1995). The board's variation in professional experience creates an enriched collective of people who contribute different ideas and ways to approach organizational issues. Like most professional boards, Equal Access's board has a large influence on the future

direction the organization will take (Tandon, 1995). Mark Gunther, Board Chair, was the Chief Financial Officer of the organization for four years, and plays a large role in daily operations.

The current organizational structure of Equal Access is hierarchical. A four-person management team consists of Ronni Goldfarb-Executive Director, Michael Bosse-Director of Programs, Derek Jentszch -Development Director, and Karen Frost-Finance Director. There are also four other staff members, as well as interns. There are currently eight paid employees at headquarters, and a new Director of Individual and Corporate Giving may join the team soon. The organization often relies on consultants for projects such as website development and board facilitation. Eight staff members may seem small, considering how many programs Equal Access endorses worldwide. But the size allows for more flexibility and quicker organizational response than larger NGOs. However, Equal Access will have to consider hiring more fulltime employees if they intend to continue to increase their budget and program capacity. Although Equal Access structure is hierarchical, it is not highly formalized and thus encourages learning, communication, initiative and risk-taking, all things critical for organization effectiveness (Edwards, 1999).

Equal Access is an open environment where employees are encouraged to explore projects and offer ideas. Decision-making is generally a team effort, and all employees are encouraged to provide their input and perspectives. Organization structures and cultures that promote flexibility and shared decision-making also tend to encourage learning, accountability, problem solving and experimentation, increasing organizational capacity and effectiveness (Edwards & Hulme, 1995). While the environment is open and

decision-making is shared, there is still a hierarchical structure in place that makes the ultimate decisions regarding organizational structure, mission, and vision. The senior management team, in conjunction with the board, makes decisions regarding significant organizational issues such as new hires, new offices, or new program areas.

Programs

Equal Access is constantly revising programs, depending on the level of program success and the availability of funding. A goal of Equal Access is to be responsive to the changing needs of programs and be ready to support successful programs that wish to grow and develop. One of the most successful programs is *Chatting With My Best Friend*, for a more extensive list of successful programs see Appendix A. “Chatting” was originally created in Nepal, where it is estimated that one out of every three Nepalese residents tune in on a weekly basis and now is the equivalent of the Oprah Show (personal communication, October 11, 2007). “Chatting” attracts millions of listeners every week, while thousands are compelled to write letters to the show’s hosts, asking personal questions that are addressed on air. The show has become an outlet for Nepalese youth to express concerns about education, career opportunities, sex, or anything else. The program has been replicated in India and Laos.

Equal Access programs are developed to fulfill the organizations mission and vision. Programs are designed using a unique, collaborative methodology that works through a ground-up process with communities. Three teams work together and with local communities to develop and implement programs: A local content team identifies important subjects for program inclusion, an outreach team comprised of other NGOs and local community organizations works directly with communities to establish local

participation, and an assessment and monitoring team comprised of local and international monitoring groups measures program impact and ensures that the programs remain responsive to community feedback (EA, 2007). The teams can be conceptualized as three intersecting circles. Each circle is self-contained and performs a specific task. Yet all these tasks are interrelated, and the interconnected nature of this approach helps to increase the effectiveness of the programs (personal communication, October 11, 2007).

Equal Access is an example of an NGO that works across national boundaries. Although Equal Access maintains its collaborative methodology, it does develop different approaches to program delivery, implementation and development that are “appropriate” to the countries they are working in. Equal Access’s ability to work in many different cultures attests to their ability to exhibit program flexibility. Equal Access is able to be flexible because they have strong values, principles, and methodologies that guide them when working in unfamiliar environments (Edwards & Hulme, 1995). Equal Access must be able to approach what may be similar issues (poverty, health, education) in new ways that are effective for different cultures.

In addition, Equal Access’s programs are able to exist in tumultuous political environments because messages stay largely apolitical. Remaining apolitical makes programs less threatening and allows citizens to feel more comfortable and safe when engaging and participating in programs that address local concerns. In addition, apolitical programs are more likely to last in countries that have tumultuous governments that could change if new leaders enter positions of political power. In other words, apolitical programs are less likely to have local “enemies” or groups who disagree with program messages (V.Prakash, personnel communication, September, 19, 2007).

International Structures

Equal Access operates offices and programs in India, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Cambodia. Additionally, the organization provides support to other NGOs in Laos, Chad, and Tajikistan. There are a total of 140 Equal Access employees world wide. The biggest office has 50 employees and is based in Kabul, Afghanistan. The other two larger offices are located in Katmandu, Nepal with about 40 employees and Phnom Pehn, Cambodia office with 30 employees. The United States (San Francisco) office has 8 staff members and currently New Delhi, India is the smallest office with only one employee.

Managers from different offices often travel to assist each other, to fundraise and build support, or for professional development. For example, Program Director Michael Bosse is based out of San Francisco, but travels 5 or 6 times a year to supervise the country offices. Equal Access staff members say it is important for them to have face-to-face contact with international staff to assist with programming efforts and support local staff (personal communication, October 11, 2007).

Although the international offices have a certain amount of daily autonomy, Equal Access is built to ensure the offices and programs remain connected. Goldfarb and Bosse want to protect the organization from fragmentation, and there are certain mechanisms in place that build dependency on San Francisco headquarters. For instance, while international staff members are encouraged to cultivate donors, all official fundraising is done through the development and finance staff at headquarters. Cultivating and

allocating financial resources is an issue that can cause tension in NGOs around the globe. The availability of financial resources is a major factor contributing to lopsided relationships between Northern NGOs and their offices around the world, especially when the bulk of financial resources are in the hands of a relatively small group of decision-makers in the North. Determining who has money to pay for activities and programs, and who does not, is one step towards recognizing the relationships of power which money generates (Jordan & Tuijl, 2000).

Instead, country offices are focused on programming. The international offices write scripts for the radio dramas, hire and manage community reporters, publish materials that relate to the radio programs, and hold leadership trainings and community empowerment workshops. International offices focus on program content because local employees are the best judges on how to provide information in interesting, culturally relevant ways. As Alan Fowler suggests, “insiders” or non-expatriates are effective catalysts for NGOs due to their deep, local insight into the community, as well as trust and acceptance by them (Fowler, 1997). The San Francisco headquarters main responsibility is to provide administrative and financial support for the international offices so they are able to execute Equal Access radio programming.

Finance

A majority of Equal Access’s financial support comes from United Nation agencies, bi-lateral and multi-lateral aid agencies, and foundations. A small percentage of funds come from individual donors and board members. Equal Access hopes to expand its fundraising abilities, primarily for the purpose of acquiring more unrestricted funding and reducing their dependency on official aid. NGOs that rely heavily on official

aid are more exposed to changes in aid policies and priorities. Reliance on a single source of aid is a sign of high vulnerability and low autonomy for an organization (Fowler, 2000). NGOs also experience reduced autonomy through their reliance on government funding, allowing the state to extend its' reach into the management and goal setting processes of organizations (Wolch, 2001). A major option for NGOs to diversify and localize their resource base is to generate financial resources for itself. However, it is important for organizations to maintain their autonomous decision-making power when considering alternative funding sources (Fowler, 2000). Equal Access is currently researching ways to diversify their financial resources (private donations, mailing lists, matching the agency with a celebrity), but still has not selected a strategy.

The budget is currently \$3.3 million. Karen Frost, Finance Director, manages the budget along with other senior management staff and the board. The cash flow is monitored closely as it is imperative that funds get delegated appropriately to specific countries and programs. Currently, about 90% of Equal Access funding is program restricted. A program budget is developed for each project and is constructed according to specifications of the funding entity. There is an overall organizational budget that combines the direct costs of the programs with the indirect costs of operations at the San Francisco Headquarters and the country offices. The organizational budget allows Karen to find a balance between indirect and direct costs, program restricted funds, and cash flow allocations to countries and programs (personal communication, October 11, 2007).

Communications Mechanisms

Currently there is no formal public relations or communications position. There has been little attempt made to publicize the work of Equal Access. Instead, the

organization communicates mostly with its partners, other NGOs, and governments. However, because the organization hopes to build a large donor base and diversify funding sources, efforts are under way to make the Equal Access brand clear and accessible to the general public. An image overhaul will include a new website and a branding consultant, who will examine the tagline, logo, and mission of the organization. Equal Access is uninterested in displaying its' name and brand unless it serves a direct purpose that can be used to strengthen the organization. For instance, Equal Access was recently approached by Cables News Networks (CNN) staff about doing a website story. Equal Access was hesitant to accept CNN's offer because they were unsure if that type of "advertising" would be useful for program development and recognition. In the end, Equal Access board and staff agreed to let CNN create a website story on the organization, see appendix B for the complete CNN story. The CNN case illustrates Equal Access's continued struggle to define and develop a communication plan.

Evaluation

Equal Access broadly defines success by the increase in the number of listening audiences, the amount of content produced, the number of community sites, and the hours of training delivered. All forms of success can be measured by the number of outputs produced by individual programs. A metrics report is compiled quarterly to report on these output numbers. Equal Access also conducts audience surveys and focus groups to gauge behavior change before and after people listen to programs. These surveys and focus groups try to measure for knowledge gained (or lost), and attitude and behavior change due to programming. Focus groups are also intended to be a forum for feedback from communities and gain a greater understanding of the

programming needs in those communities. Although Fowler suggests many NGOs are unaware of the potential of a set of measures for performance that involves stakeholders, Equal Access understands that local input and feedback is critical to measuring their success (Fowler, 1995).

Success can also be determined more organically, as Equal Access staff members observe better relationships with local NGOs, government officials, and community members. It is crucial for Equal Access to maintain and develop strong partnerships/relationships with local community organizations in order to keep a “good name” and maintain trust in the local community. Focus groups and partner feedback provide qualitative data upon which to gauge success rather than just the quantitative data produced by measuring outputs. A balance of quantitative and qualitative evaluation is important for NGOs as an overemphasis on short-term quantitative targets distorts accountability and promotes linear approaches to performance-measurement (Edwards & Hulme, 1995).

Conclusion

Clearly, Equal Access has come a long way in a short time. Its original focus, which included a focus on micro-entrepreneurship and emergency relief, has changed slightly to encompass issues related more to human rights, land law, and women’s empowerment. Its original countries have also changed. Instead of working mostly in Africa, programs have thrived in Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Nepal. This is partly due to funding, and partly due to the reception of local citizens, NGOs, and governments. Organizational leaders hope to continue to expand the program to other areas of the world.

Equal Access has been able to work in countries that are not easily accessible or trusting of outside influences. With the backing and participation of locals and government, Equal Access has proven trustworthy and able to work within communities respectfully. The positive relationships Equal Access has with the communities it works with have aided its ability to grow and continue to reach new areas. The strategy of paying close attention to local input and remaining apolitical have been fundamental in Equal Access's lasting programming and development.

Equal Access has hopes of continued growth which will be a central aspect of their three to five year strategic plan that will begin January 2008. Equal Access is anticipating undergoing serious growth in terms of funding, paid employees, and program expansion in new countries. Ronni Goldfarb is researching the best strategies for growth. It is immensely important that growth won't comprise the integrity of programming and that it happens at a controlled pace to insure money is allocated responsibly. The next few years will be an exciting and critical time for Equal Access.

Equal Access has accomplished a remarkable amount in the years since its inception. Reasons for its success are multi-fold. One reason is due to a strong, efficient staff that advocates for Equal Access locally and internationally. An additional reason may be the combination of service delivery and human rights empowerment that Equal Access strives for. And perhaps the most important reason is that the organization fills a need by advocating and providing space for dialogue in countries that have recently undergone significant changes. "Local people accept Equal Access because they see it as preserving their own culture," says Goldfarb, "And at the same time, they believe Equal Access is providing them with opportunities to better themselves and their families.

Appendix A

Changing our Worlds: This Nepalese program addresses women's rights, particularly dowry violence, the lack of educational opportunities, building peace, and sexual and reproductive rights. The program combines community interviews and an innovative radio drama that engages listeners in critical leadership training to empower women by discussing their rights.

Learning While Playing: This Nepalese program supports the psycho-social and health needs of children affected by the conflict. It addresses the low awareness level among parents and educators about the importance of early childhood development. By increasing participation in schools and addressing the profound lack of trained teachers, this combination of radio programs with hands-on training increases enrollment rates and reduces drop-out rates amongst children age three to six.

Safe Migration (Cambodia): Everyday in Cambodia youth leave their homes in search of a better life in the city. Sadly, many young women and men are unwillingly trafficked into sex work. This radio show combines city success stories and practical skills with a radio drama to encourage Cambodians to think about their options and alert them to the deadly problems that arise in cities.

Safe Migration (India): This program centers on health concerns of Indian migrants, providing information about where migrants can obtain health care, and what they might be at risk for. Safe Migration Initiative is produced in partnership with Family Health International. One of Safe Migrations goals is to reduce HIV transmission by encouraging migrants to attend health clinics. The program has caused migrants to travel over two hours to come to the health clinics/youth drop-in centers to gain emotional support.

Radio Daneh: Also known as "Knowledge Radio" is a program that provides vital development information and multi-sectoral leadership training to millions of people and thousands of communities throughout rural Afghanistan.

Appendix B

Community radio breaks taboos, brings education in Nepal

visit <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/TECH/11/16/chatting.bestfriend/> to see original article with photos

LONDON, England (CNN) -- "I feel that my life is worthless. I have lost my interest in talking to others, and in my studies too. I have also lost interest in being with a crowd of people. All I want is to sit all by myself. Is my problem an illness? Has it got any solution?" □ - *Letter from a male university student, 18, Nepal*

This extract is just one example of the 1,500 letters and 400 e-mails that Binita Shrestha, 29, receives each month. As the host of Nepalese community radio show, "Chatting with my Best Friend," Shrestha and her co-host, Binayak Aryal, provide a vital link to young people across the remote regions of the mountainous country.

"Chatting with my Best Friend," or "Saathi Sanga Manka Kura" (SSMK), launched in April 2001 with the mission to broadcast life skills to Nepalese youth and equip them with the knowledge and the confidence to make better-informed decisions.

The lively hour-long show features drama, songs and light-hearted banter between its young hosts. But the focal point of the show -- and the reason for its popularity amongst its young and often isolated audience -- is the listeners' letters section, where Shrestha and Aryal give frank, unbiased advice on everything from teenage sex, HIV and drug use to careers and family matters.

The team have handled letters from a girl whose father had raped her but whose mother wouldn't believe her; a boy whose HIV-positive girlfriend was pressuring him to marry her; a girl who had contracted a sexually transmitted disease and didn't know what to do; and girls facing sexual harassment on the streets. That's on top of the issues faced by many teens around the world: low self-esteem, lack of career opportunity, sexuality and self identity; plus the problems that have risen from the recent Nepalese conflict: enforced migration, the risk of landmines and dealing with disabilities.

Some cases, like the one from the girl who was raped, require special attention. (She was advised to talk to her older sister and was put in touch with a local

counseling center.) But the SSMK team are able to respond to most of their huge mailbag with templated letters and advice booklets, enabling the listener to make their own informed decision.

The weekly show has six million listeners across Nepal -- a staggering 20 percent of the population and 50 percent of its 14-29-year-old target audience. Since launch, it has doubled in length, has its own spin-off careers show and has sired similar projects in Cambodia and Laos. And when the SSMK team hit the road, they are greeted like film stars by legions of avid fans. "You don't ever feel lonely. Anywhere I go, I am surrounded by people," says Shrestha.

With its peer-to-peer approach, "Chatting with my Best Friend" aims to lift some of the taboos surrounding sex, drugs and related issues like human trafficking. Unsurprisingly for a country whose population is traditionally both modest and reticent, the show received some resistance when it was first broadcast. But while those taboos aren't going away -- even Shrestha says she sometimes feels awkward listening to the show with her family -- "Chatting with my Best Friend" has opened up communication both amongst youth and across the age divide.

And the show's combination of friendly chat backed up with clear information is working. One of the main achievements of "Chatting with my Best Friend," according to its listeners, is that it has boosted their self-esteem. "[The show] has helped thousands of Nepalese deprived of proper knowledge," writes one. "Several of my problems got solved through your program," adds another.

For the SSMK team, the show is no nine-to-five. The pressure is intense. When Shrestha leaves the office, her job follows her. People approach her on the street or when she's traveling, hoping that she can solve their problems. "They really have expectations," she told CNN. It can get overwhelming. "We can only give them comfort sometimes," she admitted. "I feel very bad if the situation is very critical and I am not able to do anything. We are just radio producers: we can't have solutions for everything."

But their dedication brings a closeness that she treasures: "The people that work on the show are like a family. We all know what we're working for," she said.

That closeness has helped Nepalese youth to link up with each other, too. Some found it uncomfortable to listen to the show's subject matter with their families, and chose to listen with friends. That's resulted in a thousand listener groups springing up across Nepal whose members listen to the show together each week, hold special information events and raise awareness of HIV, safe sex and other personal issues within their communities. One remote village's group even organized the building of a link road to the main highway, two kilometers away. The SSMK model's success has spurred a sister project in Cambodia, "We Can Do It!" that launches this December, and a more modest project in Laos based

within a secondary school.

Ronni Goldfarb, founder and president of Equal Access, hopes that the future will bring more opportunities for collaboration to bring the SSMK model to new countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Goldfarb is keen to point out how cost effective community radio can be. In rural Nepal, where Internet access is limited and television and print are prohibitively expensive, radio can reach thousands of youngsters who would otherwise be isolated within their small villages. Equal Access does this for less than ten cents a year per listener.

"By 2020 the world's youth population will easily reach four billion," Goldfarb told CNN. "Empowering youth -- tomorrow's leaders, parents and teachers -- with self-esteem, the confidence and skills to create a better life, and a supportive network of peers is one of the most powerful contributions Equal Access can make to future generations and to a more equitable world."

Back in Kathmandu, as half of Nepal's most famous youth radio duo, Shrestha's bright future has only begun. But she won't stay with SSMK forever. "Even though I feel really young at heart, I know that in years to come I won't be young any more," she explained. And when that day comes, she and Aryal will pass on the SSMK baton to a new generation of presenters -- who will bring the SSMK brand of friendly, supportive and practical advice to a new generation of Nepalese youth.

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