

# Community radio stations challenge Icasa over rejected licence applications

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Community and rural radio stations across South Africa have expressed their frustration because many of them are struggling to obtain a broadcasting licence which will allow them to get advertising and expand their reach.



Source: [www.unsplash.com](https://www.unsplash.com)

## Multiple applications

The Bulungula Community Radio (BCR), based in Nqileni Village, Xhora Mouth, has had multiple applications denied by Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa).

The station's current [low power sound broadcasting service licence](#) allows them to broadcast in the immediate vicinity to dozens of surrounding villages. The community sound broadcasting service licence, for which they had applied, would not only allow the station to make money through advertising, but it would also mean they could expand to broadcast to hundreds of villages. This would create additional employment opportunities at the station and bring more money into the community.



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Representatives from BCR believe that the bureaucratic nature of the Icasa application process is hindering the growth of community radio stations.

The BCR is part of the Bulungula Incubator under the Mbhashe municipality, where poverty and unemployment rates are high.

The radio station started seven years ago. At the time, ICASA had a moratorium on new community broadcast service licences (from [2015](#) to [2019](#)), and BCR could only obtain a low power sound broadcasting service licence.

Dave Martin, a director on the Bulungula Incubator's board, said the new licence could see the station grow from "a semi-professional operation to something that can run as it should".

## Appeal

Once the moratorium ended, BCR applied for a community sound broadcasting service licence in April 2020. The application was rejected in March 2021, reasons stated by Icasa included that the organisation had only had 51% quorum for annual general meetings as well as issues with the appeal mechanism for members.

After fixing these issues, the station applied again in June 2022 and was rejected in May 2023. This time, ICASA said, the rejection was due to another clause in the constitution related to the separation of powers between management and its board of directors, the station's membership appeals mechanism and because the application did not stipulate what the station's proposed "peak hours" would be should the application be granted.

Bulungula Community Radio appealed this rejection in July 2023 and has not yet received a response. "The decision [to reject] was based on two reasons: a minor, correctable error in our constitutional document; and an erroneous reading of the application," the station said in its appeal to Icasa.

Martin told GroundUp that the strict licensing application process has had a negative impact on community radio stations in rural areas. It costs over R3,800 each time stations submit a licence application to Icasa.

The Bulungula Community Radio station started seven years ago and currently broadcasts to dozens of villages.

He said community radio has been and still is the most effective way to share information in different local languages. "This radio station broadcasts from probably one of the most remote villages, to other surrounding villages. That's totally unique," he said.



East Coast Radio bids farewell to managing director, Boni Mchunu

East Coast Radio 24 Nov 2023



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In its appeal letter, the station said that Icasa's decision to reject them was not in keeping with [Section 192](#) of the Constitution which "guarantees broadcasting services to operate in the public interest, to encourage a diversity of views and to provide a wide range of programming that reflects South African attitudes, opinions, ideas, values and artistic creativity".

## Comply

Asked to comment on Bulungula's rejection, Icasa wrote to *GroundUp* that "the Applicant failed to comply with ALL the provisions of the" licence application invitation. Icasa didn't respond to our question on why Bulungula has not been informed of the outcome of its appeal process.

During the 2020 application cycle, only two of the 142 applications for the Community Sound Broadcasting Service and Radio Frequency Spectrum licences were successful. In 2022, five out of 105 applications were accepted, according to ICASA spokesperson Milly Matlou.

There are currently 221 community radio stations with licences across South Africa.

Icasa's applications are bound by regulations like the [Electronic Communications Act 36 of 2005](#) and [Community Broadcasting Service Regulations of 2019](#).

Matlou said Icasa does offer workshops to prospective applicants.

Brenda Leonard, managing director of Bush Radio, said, "Community radio initiatives such as Bulungula are crucial to educating and informing communities. Because they did not get a licence, this negatively affects the villages they want to broadcast to."

Sakkie van der Schyff, manager at Koepel Stereo (KSFM) in the Free State, believes their issues with obtaining the licence from ICASA are also hurting the community.

KSFM originally received a licence in 2011. The licence expired in 2017, and KSFM was taken off air and couldn't apply for a new broadcast licence due to the moratorium. After the moratorium ended, KSFM applied for a new licence in 2020 and again in 2022. But both applications were rejected.

Van der Schyff said KSFM has chosen to stream their shows, but this limits who is able to listen to them.

"We're missing out on an important part of the community," he said. "It's a devastating situation not having communication."

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