



*Voice To Action: Community Radio Empowering Rural Communities – Cases In
The English-Speaking Caribbean*

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VOICE TO ACTION

COMMUNITY RADIO EMPOWERING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Cases in the English-Speaking Caribbean

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Abstract

Empowerment is about the degree to which communities own and manage their resources and the extent to which such resources translate to the individual and collective benefit of the community. Community radio systems have been celebrated worldwide as excellent participatory communication tools which provide both access to information and a voice to the people of especially rural communities. These communities are usually among the poorest and most powerless, and are very often the targeted beneficiaries of empowerment programmes and projects led by international development agencies. The primary interest of this research is in exploring the role and value of communication in the evolution of the empowerment paradigm, as both the individual and the collective seek to improve the circumstances.

The research therefore, explores the mobilization and organizational functions of communication, particularly in bringing voice to poor, rural marginalized communities across the English-speaking Caribbean and the extent to which externally imposed, internationally defined measures of empowerment are manifested at both the individual/personal and collective/institutional levels. It posits that if communication plays a defining role in how the community is understood, interpreted, and projected, and if

communication is a tool for education and transformation, then it must be a critical element in defining and constructing selfhood and human agency.

Specifically, the research interrogates the degree to which a community feels empowered in relation to its level of ownership of community resources. In this instance, the ownership of a community radio station and the degree to which such communication media system promotes participation is explored as drivers of empowerment within the communities in which they are located. The argument is built on the premise that the higher the level of ownership of the resources, the more empowered the community will feel; the more empowered a community feels is the more likely for there to be action for change; ultimately, sustained action and change will lead to a more improved well-being of the community at both the individual and collective dimensions.

This, however, is not as fluid a process or outcome as while access, ownership and management of important resources are important indices of development and empowerment, these are not sufficient measures for, particularly, the rural poor in societies where the daily realities are serendipitous manifestations of persistent marginalization, brought about by economic, geographic, cultural and social factors. Methodologically and epistemologically then the search is also for a more precise indicator for interrogating the levels at which those involved in empowerment as a process actually participate, and how real or perceived power relations may be manipulated, including the use of communication, to suit stakeholder agendas and empowerment as a product. The question then is not just about access to the resources, but how and with whom the access is shared once the power of access is attained?

The serendipitous evolution of the Caribbean society is, therefore, central to the design of a case study methodology applied to five rural-based community radio stations spread across the English-speaking Caribbean. The case study combines focus group discussions amongst stakeholders across all the selected communities, as well as in-depth interviews with key performers such as programme managers and volunteers within the radio stations. These are supported by thematic analysis of project reports and the administering of a survey among the listening audiences of two of the major media systems. All the research instruments are consistent in examining the individual and collective dimensions of empowerment and five critical elements of empowerment, namely, increased access, increased capacity, informed decision making, participation, and action.

The research concludes that the degree to which a community feels empowered is positively relational to the higher degree of ownership of community resources, but it is not as clear cut that the community radio stations by themselves guarantee higher success rates at promoting ownership, participation, and empowerment within the communities in which they are located. Also of critical note is that the conversion of empowered feeling to empowered action is not as evidenced without the added political, social and economic support systems spread across the communities. While the showcasing of the cultures of the communities have found new spaces and garnered new levels of respect and acceptance, social change and empowerment require higher level decision-making among the people and more sustained translation of information and awareness into action from and by the community media systems.

Additionally, inconsistencies between social action and social change across the Caribbean communities in which the selected media systems are located also speak to the capacity of those who access the radio stations. It is evidenced that their pre-existing power-relations determine where in the power-participation matrix they fall, thus influencing their ability to drive change both internally and externally. This research shows that while many of the volunteers feel they now have more power of influence than before, it is those who come to the system with previous higher levels of power who are still engaged at the decision-making level. So, while the new knowledge and insights emerging include the development of a Caribbean typology for community communication and empowerment, the status quo is maintained in many instances and consequently, advances the acute implications for the sustainability of the empowered individual and community.