



## Can community media programmes serve as developmental approaches for at-risk youth?

*An initiative from Trinidad and Tobago*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the Shoot to Live community media initiative and data collected from this study will provide a discussion on whether or not this programme can be used as a development approach for at-risk youth. Discourses on community media, youth and development will be used as the theoretical framework for this study. Accordingly, theory and practice from these constructs can be used to develop ideas that emerge from the Shoot to Live programme. This paper initially assesses some of the various degrees of success of this community media initiative. Finally, the findings of this study will play a pertinent role in the creation, evaluation and transformation of future community media programmes and youth development approaches particularly in developing countries.

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## Introduction

The Shoot to Live initiative was a creative mentorship programme designed by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) to address the needs of at-risk youth in Trinidad and Tobago. Shoot to Live was implemented in two of the at-risk communities during the periods 2010-2011. The overall aim of this initiative was to empower approximately 20 young men between the ages of 12-16 years residing within at-risk areas of Trinidad and Tobago. This initiative provided a combination of life skills, photography and video training. This combined programme was an attempt to improve social inclusion, creativity, communication, self-expression and self-esteem (YMCA 2010).

Essentially, this programme seeks to provide access to cameras, mentors and a host of facilities for the young persons involved in this programme. The YMCA (2010) designed this initiative to allow at-risk youth in Trinidad and Tobago to explore their creative capabilities, interact with each other and the broader society, which would lead to them becoming empowered. Lewis’ (2008) reproduced definition of community media serves as a useful starting point in positioning the Shoot to Live programme as it best describes this initiative. “Community media is a term used to describe the use of media by communities, social groups and civil society organisations...” (Lewis 2008).

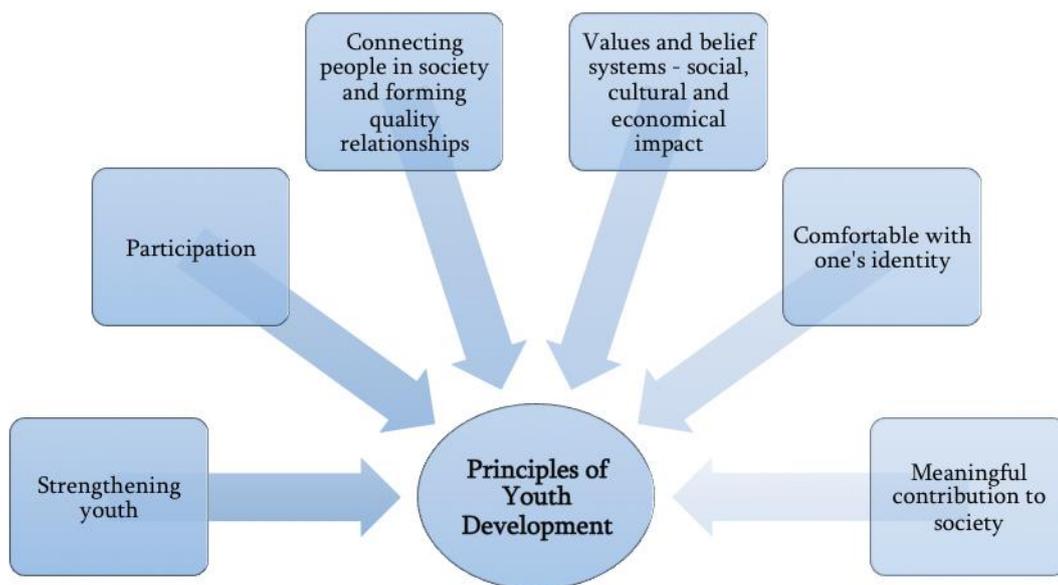
Many scholars have discussed the key characteristics and functions of community media (Coyer & Hintz 2010; Kupfer 2010; Fuller 2007; Couldry 2000; Jankowski 2002). From these discussions I have designed a framework for identifying community media programmes (see table 1). The framework provides a condensation of the key characteristics and categories of community media. It is through this framework that I have classified the Shoot to Live programme as a community media initiative based on its overall aims.

COMMUNITY MEDIA CHARACTERISTICS					
Access	Participation	Empowerment	Community networks	Mobilisation	Community development
Community Ownership and control	Alternative content	Non-commercial	Volunteer-driven	Geographic/Non-geographic	Low cost media
COMMUNITY MEDIA CATEGORIES					
Radio	Television	Newspapers	Projects	Participatory Video	Web-based or mixed media

*Table 1: Framework for identifying community media*

This concept proposed by Lewis (2008) is best suited for this study as it acknowledges the broader scope of community media unlike some of the contending definitions, which do not consider all of the capabilities of community media. Additionally, social and community benefits are the main priorities for the individuals involved. Therefore, this media type offers great advantages that mainstream media fails to provide. The most important advantage in this case is the accessibility to members of the community and the emphasis that is placed on culture.

At-risk youth, another important element in this study, refers to those persons that are predisposed to a variety of risks, which may impede one's ability to transition successfully into adulthood (Barker & Fontes 1996). The type of negative elements at-risk youth is exposed to include delinquent behaviour, drugs, teenage pregnancy and mental health issues (Batten and Russell 1995; Cunningham et al. 2008). Cunningham's (2008) definition best describes the participants of this study. She defines at-risk youth as “people who have factors in their lives that lead them to engage in behaviours or experience events that are harmful to themselves and their societies...” (Cunningham 2008).



*Figure 1: Principles of Youth Development*

To reduce some of the factors that place youth at risk, youth development must become paramount. Youth development is a paradigm that focuses on developing the competencies of young people, and it informs policy and practice for youth institutions and organisations (Wyn & White 1997). Many principles for youth development have been outlined by youth organisations (for an example see: Ministry of Youth development - Te Manatu Whakahiato Taiohi, 2014). I have merged most of the overarching ideas on this and I present the core principles of youth development (see

figure 1). Since the emergence of youth development models, scholars believe that an effective youth intervention strategy is fundamental in today's society so that youth can maximise their potentials (Small & Memmo 2004).

From these diagrams in Figure 1 and 2, it is theoretically evident that there are overlapping areas in community media and youth development. These areas include access, community, values, identity, networking, and contribution to society. Therefore, community media can, in fact, become a vehicle for achieving youth development for at-risk youth. Data collected on the Shoot to Live programme analyses the ways in which this community media initiative contributed to youth development in practice.

## **Methodology**

A grounded theoretical approach was adopted to collect and explore results of this study. Grounded theory focuses on the process of generating theory rather than a particular theoretical content (Corbin & Strauss 2008). As such data was gathered using interviews, documents and focus groups.

Documents are used as a secondary source for other primary research techniques in this study (Bertrand & Hughes 2005: 132-133; Patton 1987: 90). Documents in this research took many forms; for example they included attendance records for the participants, formative and summative evaluation documents and many other various reports related to the programme. Documents were used as a source of information on all of the activities prior to, during and after the Shoot to Live programme. The materials provided valuable data on the overall initiative. Artefacts make reference to 'anything that is made' or produced from the programme that is being assessed (Gillham, 2000: 88). The artefacts used in this study were some of the photographs taken by the participants and one of the short films produced by the second cohort of this initiative. These materials were considerably beneficial as photography and film productions were two of the core aspects of this initiative.

Focus groups were also conducted with participants from two of the at-risk communities where Shoot to Live was implemented. According to Krueger and Casey (2009), the role of the focus group is to "understand how people feel or think about a specific issue, product, service or idea" (2009: 4). Therefore, the focus group played an important role in understanding how all the stakeholders involved in the Shoot to Live programme felt about it. The focus groups also allowed me to obtain a greater understanding on how the practice coincides with the theoretical debates. The focus group discussions are expected to raise significant concerns that would aid in improving future similar initiatives. Ten interviews were conducted with the primary stakeholders of this project. They included some of the participants, the programme coordinator, facilitators and the evaluation specialist.

## **Findings**

In this section I present a thematic narrative based on some of the information I collected in the interviews, focus groups and documents.

### *Community*

Documents collected for this study demonstrates that the Shoot to live initiative occurred in two phases. The first consisted of 16 youths primarily from the Diego Martin North Secondary School. All the participants in this group were currently enrolled in school. While, the second phase consisted of 13 members from the Beetham Gardens community. Only two members of these groups were enrolled in school while the others had either dropped out before completing secondary school or securing basic certification. Background information on these participants also shows that these individuals generally exhibit disruptive behaviours at school and partake in substance abuse. The participants faced social circumstances such as single parent, parents serving jail time and social exclusion.

Shoot to live served persons from two distinct communities having a common culture, now sharing an interest in photography and videography. The initiative aimed to strengthen the identity of the community the participants belonged to, as these communities otherwise bear negative connotations within Trinidad and Tobago. Usually, persons residing in these areas find it difficult to obtain employment and are frowned upon by the rest of society. For this reason, most members of these communities often never disclose their address to colleagues, and they utilise alternative addresses to secure employment and maintain acquaintances.

The photography facilitator spoke about how those sessions assisted the participants in developing a sense of pride in their communities: “if you have to teach real value, firstly you should be taking photographs within the community.” He further explains the importance of understanding that everything that is seen deserves a photo, which he believes brings a sense of balance of the level of pride one ascertains. The data collected also shows how much this combined initiative provided a sense of belonging and inclusivity.

However, some persons still felt excluded, as they were not able to interact with the other cohort in the programme. Documents on the timelines of the Shoot to Live initiative demonstrate that programme did not run at the same time. Therefore, it would have been difficult for both groups to meet during the time of the programme. The programme coordinator expressed that the main reason the groups did not intermingle during the time of the programme was primarily for security reasons and to develop group dynamics. During this the programme coordinator expressed how concerned the

facilitators became as the groups had their own dynamics, which involved name-calling, quarrelling and other negative characteristics. So, in the end they felt it was necessary for the respective groups to work out their issues.

Although the programme focused on the traditional meaning of community, that is in a geographical sense, community could have taken on additional meanings in this initiative. Both cohorts shared similar features of being predisposed to a number of risks and having an interest in the photography and videography. The broader question is whether or not this concept of community was short-lived or retained. Some of the participants stayed in touch with the each other and the facilitators, while some of the others failed to reach out. The use of Internet as a medium of communication among the participants would have added another dimension of community. This move may have extended the margins of the community in this programme context as. However, this was not the case as there was a lack of access to new technologies and the Internet within these said communities.

### *Life skills*

The participants were taught communication skills, which enabled them to better approach members of the wider community and society. These skills were put into practice on numerous occasions during the course of the initiative. The young people discussed the overall benefits of the programme at various knowledge exchange activities, where they were able to engage with members of the media and various organisations. They were also able to interact with members of the public while taking photographs. The participants and their facilitators expressed that these activities taught them the importance of respect for individuals and their personal space. These are areas that were challenging to the participants prior to the programme and through this initiative they learnt the basic techniques that allowed them to better engage with their peers and the general public.

The programme however missed a perfect opportunity for both groups from differing at-risk communities to engage with each other. This was not achieved for safety reasons. However, the participants felt bad about themselves as they questioned why they were unable to engage with the other cohort, as some of them longed to interact with others. Having them engage with each other would have boded well for the participants involved and the wider society. This may have also initiated some degree of peace building among communities as these at-risk areas are riddled with gang-conflict in Trinidad and Tobago.

The life skill sessions focused on various topics, such as self-esteem, conflict resolution, team building, reason and emotions. The participants demonstrated that they gained knowledge on positive behaviour choices and were able to identify positive ways for conflict resolution. Most of them, in the one-on-one interviews and focus groups, gave

examples of how they avoided or resolved conflict. Here is an example of how one participant demonstrates how he was before and after the programme during a one-on-one interview:

*I was ignorant before and I didn't like to talk to nobody and I kept to myself. Quiet people deadly, you never know what they thinking. Like if someone tells me anything about my mother, that's a different scene (I would react). [After learning conflict resolution skills in the Shoot to Live programme] I would just ignore them. (Participant)*

The young men were further able to channel their emotions and understanding of issues into drama, art, photography and film. In the focus groups, the young men displayed an overall sense of pride and joy about what they accomplished in the programme. However, there was a sense of longing for more and feelings of abandonment.

The facilitators talked about how shy the participants were at the beginning of the programme. I discovered through further discussions that a lack of trust occurred for various reasons primarily because they were not familiar with the facilitators. They also refrained from openly discussing their emotions. Eventually, the on-going life skill sessions were successful in breaking down some of these barriers. Also, participants were provided with a nurturing environment and this aided with developing trust between the participants and the programme facilitators. This demonstrates that the participants made positive steps in understanding their emotions and were open enough to express them. However, from the data gathered in the focus groups it was evident that participants still struggle with communication skills. This was evident as participants were sometimes unable to respond to the questions posed without further probing by the interviewer.

### *Marketable skills*

Participants in the focus groups expressed that they enjoyed the photography, as it involved learning techniques as well as going on field trips to put their photography skills into practice. Most participants felt that the facilitators were helpful. The photographs were also exhibited, raising the consciousness of the way these young males understand society, as they labelled the photographs themselves. In this way, persons viewed the photographs through the lens of these young males residing in at-risk communities.

Participants worked in groups to take photos in relation to the topics discussed in the life-skills sessions. These photographs served as a starting point for the development of short films, as it featured the social issues facing the young people, such as poverty and mental struggles of bondage. They also managed to capture images of landscapes and flowers. See a sample of some of the photographs taken by the participants in Figures 2, 3 and 4.



Figure 2: Trapped in a web



Figure 3: Red Ivy



Figure 4: Emancipate yourself

Participants seem most inclined to the videography sessions. The participants from the Beetham Gardens mainly felt this excitement as their film was screened at the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival. At the film festival, members of the public were able to view and discuss the different aspects of this film. The general public was able to hear the voices of the young males through film as it was screened at the largest cinema in Trinidad and Tobago.

The main story line of the short film<sup>2</sup> developed by the participants was that members of a gang murdered a pastor's son in the community. Although the gang leader was violent,

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<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://bit.ly/shoot-to-live>

he did not condone the murder. The gang leader openly spoke against the crime committed and made a promise to change his life. The said gang leader turned to religion in an effort to transform his life. The participants admitted that the short film was a depiction of their lifestyle. Apart from the evidence of major gang violence and bullying. It seems that religion plays an important role, and it poses a broader question as to the ways in which religion can positively impact on at-risk communities.

Most of the participants were keen on creating more films in the future. However, not all of participants were able to put their skill into practice. It was also hoped that participants would use the skills obtained to pursue careers in photography and videography fields if they so desired. This was one of the aims of this programme as unemployment is a major problem in these communities.

### *Positive change in attitudes and behaviour*

The life skills, which served as the mentoring aspect of the programme, provided participants with positive role models. It was hoped that participants would modify their behaviour over time based on the skills learnt from their mentors. Many existing programmes in various parts of the world demonstrate that mentorship initiatives have longer lasting effects as youths are less inclined to partake in risky activities such as drug use or disruptive behaviour at school.

Summative evaluation findings from the YMCA suggest that both parents and facilitators have seen improvements in the attitudes and behaviours of the participants while the young men were being mentored. Facilitators felt that participants were better able to interact and co-operate with peers, work in teams, think critically, manage conflict, make decisions and develop self-confidence. However, most of the evidence suggests that the majority of the participants did not maintain an improvement in their attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, the impact was short term. For this reason parents and education providers suggest that there is a need for continued mentorship with the participants for more long lasting impact on attitudes and behaviour. Facilitators also felt that the programme merely allowed for the development of trust, but there were no opportunities to maintain the trust because of the short programme cycle.

Participants also admit that they were less inclined to participate in criminal activities during the time of the programme as they were preoccupied with programme activities. For this reason, when the programme ended they thought less about criminal activities and sought legal ways to generate income having obtained new skills. Since the completion of this programme it is difficult to assess whether or not the participants have continued to maintain this attitude and behaviour. The reality is that when one is faced with the difficulty of not being able to secure future employment the role of values may have little to no impact on that specific situation. There is a huge possibility that the

individuals may regress and return to criminal activities as large sums of money are ascertained in a fast and easy manner.

### *At-risk youth transitioning to adulthood*

Overall the intention of the programme was to assist youth in transitioning into adulthood, primarily by preparing them for the employment industry and starting a family. The transition period involves acquiring the competencies necessary for adulthood. One of the aims of the Shoot to Live initiative was to provide young people with the some of the core skills necessary to successfully transition into adulthood. This programme shows that youth experience the transition process differently and this primarily relates to social and economic status of the communities and country. Most of the participants came from very poor or low-income homes. Some participants even talked about how they were forced to take on adult responsibilities because of a lack of finances in the family. The notions of youth presented by some scholars misrepresent youth as a whole. The Shoot to Live programme in fact proves that youth are not powerless, irresponsible or rebellious.

What is evident is that there is a unique youth culture, where their creativity language, style, music and so forth exists while they are on their journey to becoming adults. Despite the presence of distinct youth cultures, individuals still have the capability of remaining diverse. The culture exhibited by the parents may influence the beliefs and or actions of youth.

One of the participants was able to obtain an internship with the production company that facilitated the videography segment. The establishment of the Photography Club in Beetham was one of the attempts made by the community to hone in the skills developed and encourage more persons to participate. However, the community was unsuccessful in getting the photography club up and running. Meanwhile, some of the participants were able to obtain freelance opportunities to photograph events for various organisations. So those participants were able to earn some monies, but not on a permanent basis. A few of them did express that they were able to share their photography skills with their peers and parents. While two of the participants mentioned that they volunteered on the film team in their church.

Evidence collected in the fieldwork also suggests that most of the young males acquired professional skills but there were few opportunities. One of the cohorts suggested that the film production should become a business venture, and the profits should go to them. At the end of the programme, participants felt that they could not utilise the media training, as most of them did not secure internships. Participants from the Diego Martin cohort did not express positive outcomes with their acquired photography skills.

### *Programme challenges and ways to improve the Shoot to Live programme*

The programme faced a number of challenges namely there were many barriers to sustaining an initiative of this nature without continued financial support from established organisations. Fortunately, the funding agency and NGO left the cameras with the community action group so that individuals within the community can carry on with this programme. Programmes should be designed in such a way that allows for sustainability upon completion of the programme.

Future Shoot to live programmes can be better improved through the concept of social enterprise. Social enterprise is broadly defined as the use of market-based or business acumen, and civil society approaches to address social issues (Gray et al. 2003: 141-154; Kerlin 2009). The social enterprise framework can be viewed as an innovative response to the funding problems (Dees 1998). There are some community media initiatives such as Youthworx<sup>3</sup> in Australia that have successfully used this approach to sustaining these types of initiatives. For example the photography facilitator demonstrated some income-generating opportunities for this programme. He explained that the photography taken by the participants could have been used as artwork design for T-shirts, which in the end could have been sold. This programme can also be further improved by forging partnerships with existing agencies media training institutions and youth business organisations, so that participants can obtain further training in relevant areas.

In the focus groups and one-on-one interviews, participants voiced their concerns about initially trusting organisations that provide temporary aid. Community members openly voice their concerns of being guinea pigs for the implementing organisation's benefit. Communities become distrustful of organisations, and an additional concern emerges as to whose agenda was prioritised. This is oftentimes the dilemma with NGO funded managed programmes. For example, participants expressed an interest in generating income from their photographs that were exhibited and short films. However, the funding agency and nongovernmental organisations were focussed on achieving the programme goals. I think that it is important for the NGO, funding agency and community to discuss and negotiate roles (agency and participation) at programme design level to avoid some of these issues from reoccurring.

All of the data collected strongly suggests that the YMCA should have played a better role in transitioning the programme into the hands of the community. In this way, when the programme had been handed down to the communities they would have been better equipped to guide the participants. Avenues should be created for ongoing relationships with communities, so that they do not feel a sense of abandonment. Mentors should keep in touch with participants to offer continued support and guidance if and when needed. More emphasis should be placed on communication skills and advocacy for policies that

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<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.cci.edu.au/projects/youthworx>

encourage the use of community media techniques especially within schools. The development of a Media for Social Change fund has been established in varying parts of the world, and the organisation of the same within a Trinidad and Tobago context may prove to be vital to the social change. Some believe that this may also encourage partnership between mainstream and community media.

Despite these challenges, participants, facilitators, parents and educational providers were overall satisfied with the programme. They all expressed a desire for ongoing forms of these programmes so that the young people could continue the development of skills obtained in this programme.

## **Conclusion**

The initiative has proven to be a successful community media initiative as it has provided access, participation, partial ownership, inclusivity and a bottom-up approach to members of two geographically defined communities (Fuller 2007; Lewis 2008). These characteristics are central to all community media initiatives. The young people had access to the programme services, they were proud owners of the outputs, they felt included as a community and at the end of the initiative they felt like they had contributed something creative and meaningful to society.

Additionally, there was evidence of linkages among the state, non-governmental organisations and communities, as scholars such as Bailey et al. (2007: 219-336) describe in their multi-theoretical approach to community media. Despite these connections, the community's voices were clear, and citizens felt empowered during and after this initiative. Although non-governmental organisations and citizens felt like their voices were heard, the ownership remains debatable as evidence suggests that the state held the advantage as they financed this initiative. These issues of power negotiation can be seen in many similarly structured community media initiatives. Therefore, these power struggles need to be discussed at programme design level and must be continuously monitored throughout the programme.

These overall findings suggest that improved community media initiatives can potentially succeed. This research is not conclusive but one of the benefits of community media initiatives can be certainly be youth development. From this study I believe that further research should be conducted in this area to determine whether or not community media is a suitable approach for youth development.

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