

COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE:

A Case Study in Jamaica

This essay was written by Robert Carr, Ph.D., who is Executive Director of the Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition.

The Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition (CVC) is a Pan-Caribbean coalition of indigenous frontline service providers working with marginalized groups around the Caribbean, including Dutch, English, French, Spanish and Kreyol speaking countries. Our mission is ambitious, seeking to transform the way in which the region understands the root causes of HIV and AIDS. Since we formed in December of 2004, there has been a revolution in both the level and the quality of debates around the role that structural vulnerability—the “vulnerable” in CVC—plays in our societies in relation to HIV. This vulnerability affects fundamental issues of social exclusion and governance, and in turn, failures of governance play into social exclusion in ways that hurt our efforts to provide services to people and groups who are hardest hit by HIV and AIDS. We see this dynamic every day in our work with youth in especially difficult circumstances, with sex workers, with drug users and prisoners, and with gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men, among other groups.

These are unique programmes and concerns in the Caribbean, but we feel deeply that only as the least regarded of our communities is treated can we make claims to just societies. Our historians remind us that our societies emerge from bloodshed—the extermination of the indigenous peoples in most islands, the creation of brutal slave societies, the oppression of colonial industrial colonies—but all on the basis of claiming our rights as men and brothers, women and sisters and not chattel; our rights as workers who had a right to form unions and press for representation through nationalist parties; and finally, our rights as citizens of our countries. CVC honours our enduring tradition—steeped in our own indigenous history of human rights—to stimulate dialogue on equality and justice through advocacy in the public sphere, including the media; to strengthen programming for the socially excluded through networking; and to work with key institutions in line with their mandates to strengthen the resilience and inclusion of marginalized groups.

We are a learning organization, and with every intervention we do, every meeting we attend or host for our members, we understand new ways in which we can make our Caribbean countries more humane, and more true to our spirit of seeking justice and fairness for all. Work in this area can only happen through strong partnerships with the media, and we believe it is a central responsibility of media practitioners and managers to reflect on the effect messages have on the public. This reflection also means taking stock of what media can do to promote dialogue on social inclusion and social justice, as well as good governance. In this effort, members and

leadership of the Caribbean Broadcast Media Partnership (CBMP) have been very important. The CBMP has worked with CVC to develop as well as air programming that raises issues faced by the members of our Caribbean family who are often forgotten and outcast. For many broadcast partners with whom we work, it is a matter of corporate responsibility to the ideals of journalism. This can include addressing some of the most difficult issues in complicated challenging environments.

As one example of this, the Coalition has had some success with a key partner in Jamaica, the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, JFLAG. The partnership is an important one as CVC research has shown that, in Jamaica as in other Caribbean countries, HIV prevention or access to care and support is ineffective if the structural drivers, in Jamaica’s case extreme homophobic violence, are not addressed. One of the key lessons learnt is that structural interventions to address these structural drivers require strong partnerships over the medium- and long-term. CVC, JFLAG and its partners, including Jamaica AIDS Support for Life, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International Jamaica have all been vocal anti-stigma advocates, doing important and effective work.

A central strategy for this work is based on communication for social change, which involved the strategic use of advocacy, communication and social mobilization in order to systematically facilitate and accelerate change in the underlying drivers of HIV risk, vulnerability and impact. There are various ways of communicating the messages of change including the macro level that broadcasts the message on a national, regional, and sometimes global level, the meso message which reaches out to groups and institutions, and the micro level which targets the individual. Today's information technology enables the incorporating of all these interlinking possibilities.

Ecological models illustrate "levels" or "layers" of influence that affect individual opportunities and choices. Different stakeholders operate at different "layers" and all must be reached using appropriate channels and activities in order to shift the barriers to universal access. At the broader structural and societal level of cultural values, residence patterns, policies and laws, message are disseminated through and to political groups, lawmakers and religious leaders among others. These messages both set and maintain the context in which we work.

The stated goals of communication for social change are to act as a catalyst for reflection and action at the individual, community and policy levels, and to provide a platform for coordinated action by a necessary and sufficient coalition of stakeholders to achieve a common goal. The strategy is a multi-pronged campaign focusing on rights for all Jamaicans and on the inclusion of MSM, PLHIV and SW as of the people, and thus, deserving of equal rights. The campaign began in 2004 with a media launch, website, radio and TV PSAs, key spokespersons from the community and sector leaders as well as ongoing research to monitor progress.

Behind the scenes strategies have been continuous throughout 2006 to 2008 with partners in the National HIV Programme, the police, the media, local human rights organizations as well as international allies. In each of the key institutions, there have been improvements in addressing the issues of violence and social exclusion regarding MSM and interpreting their mandate to include MSM, and women who have sex with women as well (although the violence is less often reported). In each area it is a work in progress in terms of institutional change and institutional partnerships and ownership of the issues and solutions. There have been substantially improved relationships with the police, substantially improved relationships with local human rights organizations, somewhat improved relationships with religious leaders and substantially improved willingness to take a stand on the part of some sector leaders.

With ongoing community action, the continuous strengthening of regional and national alliances, collective learning and the acceptance that this is an open-ended process of learning and action, we hopefully can move forward into an era of greater humanity. In this, the media will play a central role in promoting values of social justice, progress and social inclusion.

This essay is based on an address delivered at the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City, Mexico on August 5, 2008. The address by Robert Carr and Ian McKnight was called "Structural Interventions to Address Homophobia in the Jamaican Context." For more information on CVC, go to www.cvccoalition.org