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Music Therapy: A Community Approach to Social Justice

Guylaine Vaillancourt

Abstract

This theoretical paper demonstrates how music therapy—and more specifically, community music therapy (CoMT)—can contribute to social justice. CoMT is a creative approach that liberates expression, giving voice to groups of people of all ages and races and of any status who in turn contribute to building a better society. It also reveals how the leadership literature presents the concept of service in addressing social justice and how the fields of psychology and sociology of music shed some light on the use of music for social justice. Finally, future implications for training music therapists for social justice are explored.

Keywords: community music therapy, social justice, music, leadership

Music Therapy: A Community Approach to Social Justice

One of the noblest and most exquisite aspects of our human character is our desire to alleviate suffering by expressing our compassion, to care about one another. The field of music therapy attracts exceptionally caring people who wish to serve those among us who are at risk and often in extreme states of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual distress. (Kenny, 1998, p. 205)

I have been a music therapist for more than 20 years, and my practice has always been influenced by a desire for equality and universal access to human services for children, adults, and elders who are in need. I am inclined toward a depth of practice suggested by Kenny (1988, 2002, 2006), Ruud (1998, 2004, 2005), and Stige (2002a, 2003, 2004), who see the social and cultural role of music therapists from a broad and inclusive perspective.

Our sociocultural heritage is influenced by our personal and working experiences and encounters. Social justice is directly related to my own sociocultural background, as I live in a social-democratic country that values equality, democracy, and universal access to health care, education, and social services. I also come from a French culture that has struggled for survival in the midst of a continent with an English-speaking majority.

I was predisposed to peace and social justice issues here and abroad prior to my interest in community music therapy (CoMT). My own contributions have been through my involvement with the Music Therapists for Peace movement founded by Edith Boxill (1988) (b.1917–d.2005).

In this paper I examine literature in the fields of psychology, sociology, leadership theory, and music therapy for support of the use of music for social justice in a community music therapy context.

Social Justice

Green (1998) writes that social justice is characterized as social and economic equality and democracy and that equality in social justice refers to the concept that societal members have equal access to public goods, institutional resources, and life opportunities. Thus all individuals within a society are treated equally. Furthermore, Green states, democracy responds to inclusive principles where every class of people participates in control and decision-making processes through institutions such as families, schools, and workplaces. Social justice concepts have been expressed through various media, including music, resulting in a growing interest in music from researchers in sociology and psychology.

Music, sociology, and psychology

Sociological branches of social justice and social movements have, in some instances, used arts and music as social tools. Eyerman and Jamison (1998) explore the link between social movements and culture, in particular music, with the theoretical question, "How do social movements contribute to processes of cognitive and cultural transformation?" (p. 9). They elaborate on a cognitive approach that "focuses attention on the construction of ideas within social movements and on the role of movement intellectuals in articulating the collective identity of social movements" (p. 21). Eyerman and Jamison are interested in the cognitive praxis of social movements, particularly with music, as this type of cultural activity contributes "to the ideas that movements offer and create in opposition to the existing social and cultural orders" (p. 24).

Eyerman and Jamison (1998) state that music is, in some instances, "truth-bearing and knowledge-producing" (p. 22) as demonstrated through exemplary actions although they do not claim that in all cases music has a truth-bearing function in the social movement. Meaning and identity are articulated through social movements, fostering strong emotional engagement.

Culture is viewed, they say, as "the independent variable, as the seedbed of social change, supplying actors with the sources of meaning and identity out of which they collectively construct social action and interaction" (p. 162). This statement embraces the possibility that social movements could play a key role in addressing social justice issues. Eyerman and Jamison also claim that "the music of social movement transcends boundaries of the self and binds the individual to a collective consciousness" (p. 163). As stated by the music sociologist DeNora (2002), music is like social glue that allows for communication and socialization for almost all individuals. Her research looks at the dynamic role of music for social ordering and self-regulation. In another article, DeNora (2005) argues:

> Over time, music's transfiguration of states and conditions gain validation becomes a social achievement and a referent for how collective action elsewhere might proceed. In this respect, musicing may ultimately lead to critical consciousness of "what else might be transformed" (the radical promise often attributed to music and its potential as a medium of subversion and/or social change). (p. 14)

DeNora (2005) adds that music has a strong impact on the individual because it reunites one's intense personal and subjective experience to that of a culture of the collective.

Small (1998) introduces the term *musicking*: "To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing" (p. 9). Furthermore, Small argues that when participating in a musical performance, you are actually saying to yourself and to one another, "This is who we are*"* (p. 134). The musical performers might have strong influence and control over socialization and communication, but as Small

says, who we are is also developed through the choices, values, and relationships the listeners establish with the music.

Music's active properties may help forge social constructs within a particular cultural context where it reflects specific meanings for its practitioners. DeNora (2003) is interested in how music espouses the role of "socializing medium," which carries values and competence, and she also argues that music may contribute to perpetrating social differences. In fact, some community music therapists are interested in eliminating these social differences that create barriers through marginalization and exclusion. Music also can be envisioned as a constructive social actor that allows equal access to resources when used in a CoMT context.

Hargreaves and North (1999) are concerned with the cognitive, emotional, and social functions of music, but they place the social dimension of music at the core of music psychology, which has focused on the cognitive and emotional aspects of music while neglecting its social functions. They identify "the management of *self-identity*, *interpersonal relationships*, and *mood*" (p. 72) as the three main social functions of music. Self-identity is reinforced through music, which contributes to self-definition and the creation of subcultures, as seen with adolescents. Composers also assert their identity through their works. Interpersonal relationships are established and maintained through music encounters that reinforce a sense of belonging for subgroups. The authors also note that the music therapist–client relationship is a crucial component that develops through music. Finally, music serves as a mood mediator according to situation, environment, and specific goals.

Merriam (as cited in Hargreaves & North, 1999) describes 10 functions of music: emotional expression, aesthetic enjoyment, entertainment, communication, symbolic representation, enforcing conformity to social norms, physical response, validating social

institutions and religious rituals, the continuity and stability of culture, and the integration of society. Hargreaves and North (1999) reinterpret these 10 functions in relation to their social aspects, asserting that these functions all have social dimensions that could be revisited.

Davidson (2004) examines musical performance in relation to CoMT and finds that the social-psychological processes are complex and comprise the following:

1. Playing with a number of social roles—leader, follower, etc.—and so working as an ensemble to regulate the music as it unfurled.
2. Articulating and presenting ideas through music in an overt form, through illustrative emotional communication and emblematic behavior.
3. Working with a musical narrative, so being inside the music, or . . . being conversational with the musical language itself.
4. Conversely, working outside of the musical narrative, and focusing simply on audience concerns.
5. Being happy to "show off" and to do this through overt display activities. (p. 124)

She reports that social psychology focuses on interpersonal communications, which are demonstrated through subtle nonverbal cues and gestures. She proposes that this information is important for community music therapists in order to better understand the dynamics of individuals and groups in the coconstruction of music. A future theory of CoMT, in her view, should include aspects of identity and the sociocultural impacts of music. Davidson is hoping for a more formal definition of work that includes the various forms of musical engagement and communication through performance or listening.

Leadership

Leadership and Social Justice

My vision of social justice is inspired by leadership models that value inclusiveness, interdependence, and equal participation like the ones articulated by Bennis (2003), Greenleaf (2002), and Wheatley (1999). Throughout the leadership literature, the philosophical concept of service in our profession and community keeps coming back. I believe it is part of our duty to bring our personal and professional competencies into the service of human beings.

Greenleaf (2002) introduced the concept of *servant-leadership,* in which "the natural feeling [is] that one wants to serve first." Unlike the *leader-first,* "the servant-first's 'mission' is that other people's highest priority needs are being served. . . . Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (p. 27). The popular idea that it is not our responsibility or that bad forces are at play when we are faced with no leadership allowing us to dissociate from our own social responsibility regarding the wellbeing of our fellow human beings. Greenleaf adds, "A strong natural servant who has the potential to lead but does not lead, or who chooses to follow a nonservant is the enemy of a better society" (p. 59).

Greenleaf (2002) also talks about a*wareness* and the need for individuals to develop their unique creative potential:

> Awareness, below the level of the conscious intellect, I see as infinite and therefore equal in every human being, perhaps in every creature. . . . Remove the blinders from your awareness by losing what must be lost, the key to which no one can give you, but which your own inward resources rightly cultivated will supply. (p. 340)

Greenleaf's servant-leadership concept promotes humility and respect, enhancing a sense of equality and encouraging the participation of all community members. He states:

> If a better society is to be built, one that is more just and more loving, one that provides greater creative opportunity for its people, then the most open course is to raise both the capacity to serve and the very performance as servant of existing major institutions by new regenerative forces operating within them. (p. 62)

Educating future leaders for social justice

Studies show that students in professions such as counseling, psychology, and education who are educated in regard to social justice demonstrate an increased emotional understanding of social injustice, societal causes of human distress, and the skills necessary for social change (Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006). Brown (2006) proposes an andragogical framework that can address the educational aspect of social justice issues. She explored, through a mixed method study conducted with graduate students, the effects of an alternative and transformative andragogy framework that prepares educational leaders who are committed to social justice and equality.

Brown (2006) looked at three theoretical perspectives—adult learning theory (Knowles, 1984), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000), and critical social theory (Freire, 1970)—to conceptualize an alternative, transformative framework and to prepare programs with the andragogical processes of critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995), rational discourse (Mezirow, 1991), and policy praxis (Freire, 1985). Brown states that the educational system has perpetuated inequities and unequal access to underprivileged students by preserving the status quo.

In this context, leadership preparation programs are keys to explore deeper issues of social justice, equality, and diversity. Brown (2006) argues that in order to train educational leaders adequately and to increase students' awareness of sociopolitical and sociocultural constructs, it is necessary to connect theoretical knowledge to practice:

> By being actively engaged in a number of transformative learning strategies requiring the examination of ontological and epistemological assumptions, values and beliefs, context and experience, and competing worldviews, future leaders will be better equipped to understand, critically analyze, and grow in their perceived ability to challenge various forms of social oppression including racism, sexism, heterosexism, anti-Semitism, ableism, and classism. (p. 705)

The qualitative data from Brown's (2006) study demonstrated growth in awareness of self, acknowledgement of others, and action. These related to each of the three andragogical processes of critical reflection, rational discourse, and policy praxis respectively. She concluded that the study can encourage educational administration programs to better prepare leaders who need to examine their own expectations, beliefs, and actions in order to better serve social justice. Her contribution to educational leadership and social justice is both theoretical and practical.

Leading social justice though music

Reger (2007) examines the issues of leadership, contemporary feminism, and music in a qualitative case study of three feminist communities. Using interviews, Reger notes that these women experience a sense of community through the messages of songs. In addition, the musicians help connect participants to a community that shares the same values and struggles; love for their artists provides the young women with political and emotional stimulation as they strongly identify with the musicians.

In his study, Reger (2007) also presents emotional mobilization and feminist empowerment on a community level. *Emotional mobilization* is described as "the articulation of an emotional state (i.e., pride, shame, anger, joy) that causes a change in an individual's behavior

and aligns him or her to a movement" (p. 1353). This concept might be central in certain CoMT contexts when working with marginalized individuals who directly transmit a message of assertion and pride through music, lyrics, and performances. Not all artistic presentations are related to social justice, but it is a possible message carrier. We can ask ourselves if the message is heard even louder when it comes from nontraditional, unusual, and unexpected musicians—such as our clients—encouraging a move toward inclusiveness.

Community Music Therapy

The concept of CoMT has been getting more acknowledgment in the music therapy discourse since 2000 by authors such as Ansdell (2002, 2003, 2005); Kenny and Stige (2002); Pavlicevic and Ansdell (2004); Ruud (2004); Stige (2002b, 2003, 2004); and Stige, Ansdell, Elefant, and Pavlicevic (2010). Ansdell (2002) suggests that CoMT is "a context-based and music-centered model that highlights the social and cultural factors that influence music practice, theory, and research" (p. 109). He and his colleagues define *CoMT* as follows:

> An approach to working musically with people *in context,* acknowledging the social and cultural factors of their health, illness, relationships, and musics [*sic*]. It reflects the essentially communal reality of musicing [*sic*] and is a response both to overly individualized treatment models and to the isolation people often experience within society. (p. 120)

Assuming that CoMT is valid (if not yet well established in contemporary practice), I am articulating, through my own sociocultural and music therapy background, a definition of *CoMT* as a starting point for reflection and research: the use of music therapy approaches in the community to increase social and cultural awareness and bring a sense of societal participation to all concerned.

CoMT can transform how individuals look at and understand each other. The example I have in mind is a boys' choir project created by a music therapy intern who wanted to connect a marginalized group to their surroundings. These boys with behavioral disorders expressed their inner beauty and genuine nature through songs. The songs were carefully chosen or composed by the children; themes of acceptance, social justice, and peace were voiced by those directly affected by these issues. While transforming their audience, the boys' choir also transformed themselves and increased their self-esteem.

Community Music Therapy and Social Justice

The choice to advance social justice issues and to carry messages through CoMT is collaborative work that involves music therapists, clients, their families, and communities. CoMT's specific contexts, goals, practitioners, and intended messages have to be taken into account when designing such projects.

Even though social inclusion, well-being, and a sense of belonging are central to CoMT, there is no clear statement about CoMT as a potential vehicle for social justice. Obviously not all music therapists involved in CoMT have the desire to pursue activism or social justice advocacy. However, in the following section we will see that CoMT can help society evolve toward a broader understanding and resolution of injustices by raising awareness on both sides of the fence: on one side, the clients claiming the right to exist as who they authentically are and, on the other side, the community learning to include them as equal members of society, a concept which Amir (2004), Procter (2004), and Zharinova-Sanderson (2004) have demonstrated in their work. Edwards (2002) states that bringing forward the idea of music therapy as sociopolitical work reinforces the social role of music as a force for change. Edwards is a strong advocate for taking social and political stands through music therapy.

Kenny (2006) and Stige (2002a) bring forward implicit social justice concepts of inclusion and participation, the former with a multicultural perspective and the latter with a cultural context focus. In the same way, Hadley (2006) is fostering the emergence of feminist music therapy as an approach that advocates equality and social justice in an interesting collection of papers titled "Feminist Perspectives in Music Therapy."

Among these is a paper about CoMT and feminist therapy theory (O'Grady & McFerran, 2006) that bridges CoMT and social justice. O'Grady and McFerran (2006) argue that feminist therapy theory and CoMT share common features of "gendered social, cultural, and political environments" (p. 64). These two approaches go beyond conventional music therapy (Stige, 2002b) or a consensus model (Ansdell, 2002) to further address the "oppressive potential of therapy, society, and the self" (O'Grady & McFerran, 2006, p. 63). The authors compare issues that are found in both feminist therapy theory and CoMT such as individualism versus culture-centeredness in therapy, where the person is not separated from her or his cultural environment; systematic versus context-dependent processes, where the medical and psychotherapeutic models are challenged; expert versus collaborator, in which the dynamic can be considered a power issue; and finally, diagnosis versus ability, where the focus is respectively on labeling pathology and on wellness. *Therapy*, a term inherited from traditional models that perpetuate inequalities, is used sparingly to avoid distancing in the relationship. O'Grady and McFerran (2006), nevertheless, decided to incorporate the term *therapy* into their feminist practices in order to keep addressing "health issues related to patriarchal oppression" (p. 77).

O'Grady and McFerran (2007) also look at the relationship between CoMT, community music practices, and feminist therapy, and they find tensions in how we approach individuals in

their social context. They focus on women's issues in the context of a patriarchal society even though they are aware of the inclusive aspects of feminist therapy.

Ruud (2004) uses concepts of social health and could be considered a pioneer in the emerging definition of CoMT as well. He defines CoMT as "the reflexive use of performance-based music therapy within a systemic perspective" (p. 1). Ruud observes that the therapist must be aware of the cultural context and be sensitive and reflexive to the client process—especially when involved in public performance.

Bruscia (1998) considers CoMT an "ecological practice [that] includes all applications of music and music therapy where the primary focus is on promoting health within and between various layers of the socio-cultural community and/or physical environment" (p. 229). The client is seen within an ecological system comprised of subsystems interacting and influencing each other.

Stige, a Norwegian music therapist, is an important figure in CoMT. His doctoral thesis, "Elaboration toward a Notion of Community Music Therapy" (2003), is the first comprehensive theoretical work on this emerging trend. He attempts to respond to questions such as, "What are the relationships between music and community? We may think of music *in* community, music *as* community, and music *for* community. What is then Community Music Therapy? What is music therapy anyway?" (p. xi).

Stige (2002a, 2005) presents a participatory action project that was conducted in Norway as part of a cultural project with a group of individuals with mental challenges. Stige (2005) qualifies this CoMT project as an opportunity to address concepts of "equality and justice" (p. 412). Social justice is a large umbrella that implies social change, which is embedded in a cultural context. For Stige (2002a), community music therapy can be seen as a cultural

engagement" where "the local community is not only a context *for* the work but also a context to be worked *with*" (p. 113). His project is a reflection of individuals being part of a *community* that is *cultural* in nature.

Stige's "Upbeat" project (2002a) brought together adults with Trisomy 21 syndrome in their 30s and 40s who lived in institutions. They were admitted to the Community Music School in Sandane as a national political initiative to increase access to participation in cultural communities for individuals with handicaps and health problems. The music sessions began at the school, and one participant asked a significant question, "May we, too, play in the brass band?" This evoked an amazing response from the music therapists and the community: a work of collaboration involving participants, music therapists, community groups, choirs, and the municipality, resulting in positive outcomes regarding inclusion and a sense of belonging for participants and the larger community.

Participatory action research and social change (Selener, 1997) connect naturally with CoMT. In the case of the "Upbeat" (Stige, 2002a) project, participatory action research was prompted by an inquiry to advance CoMT. Stige (2002a) wonders if music therapy researchers should contribute to social change. He believes that "music therapists and researchers *do* have some political and social responsibility" (p. 278) and that they should move toward acting directly in concrete settings by exploring possibilities and limitations.

Oosthuizen, Fouché, and Torrance (2007) studied the collaborative work of community music therapists and musicians who have been providing services to disadvantaged groups in South Africa. Researchers were able to explore roles on both sides. Oosthuizen et al. found that community musicians contribute with their cultural knowledge, musical skills, and role modeling

through the various projects, while community music therapists emphasize relationships, group processes, and mentoring of community musicians.

Oosthuizen et al. (2007) work as music therapists at the Music Therapy Community Clinic (MTCC). They initiated a project, "Music for Life" (MFL), which provides music activities to children in the community in larger groups than the ones seen in the clinic. These children suffer a wide range of distressing conditions from physical to psychological trauma. The main goal of the project has been "to 'keep the children off the street' by providing them with a socially healthy alternative, a social group that they could belong to, and a safe environment where they could build healthy relationships with their peers" (Oosthuizen et al., 2007, p. 4), and they worked with community musicians as the demand increased from other groups and communities. Children took part in projects such as choirs, drumming circles, marimba ensembles, and rap groups. They also learned various traditional musical styles and songs from African groups. MTCC's music therapists co-led or supervised the groups "to offer support for musicians and children" (Oosthuizen et al., 2007, p. 5).

These music therapists found that performance in this context was beneficial for all the community:

> Parents often lose hope for the future of their children. Performances give parents and other community members the opportunity to witness the potential, vibrant energy, and resilience of their children, whilst also allowing children to enjoy the communities' enthusiastic response to their accomplishments. Through performances, the MFL Project moves out into the community, and those who are members of MFL groups become leaders of their community as they become a voice offering parents and children alike a

positive social experience, offering possibilities for what their community can be. (Oosthuizen et al., 2007, p. 9)

Curtis and Mercado (2004) propose the convergence of two community practices with citizens who have developmental disabilities: community engagement and CoMT through a performing arts program. Community engagement is a new trend that responds better to the need for socialization, a sense of belonging, and true friendship. In other contexts people with developmental disabilities are accompanied by human service professionals, volunteers, and family, but friendship through a larger social network is encouraged in community engagement. Through a qualitative inquiry, Curtis and Mercado look closely at the issue of friendship, which "is characterized by acceptance, communication, and reciprocation" (p. 2).

Bird (1998), a Canadian music therapist, applied CoMT in a different context. She worked in a large city with street kids to help them find alternatives to drugs and alcohol through the creative arts therapies. She explored the intersection of music therapy and social action work to help them develop self-esteem, leadership, and social skills. Bird did not mention CoMT but created an innovative music performance project called "I'm Dangerous With Sound," accomplished by seven street youth. She states that "the arts are one avenue towards social change and a healthier community" (p. 67).

Stewart (2004), a music therapist trained in social work and psychotherapy, describes his work in Northern Ireland in a community trauma counseling center for children, families, and communities affected by the social and cultural conflicts. His work inspired him to develop a project he named community music therapy before hearing that this concept was developing elsewhere. This "Music for Health" project helped community group volunteers when working closely with a population under stress. He describes the social and cultural context being

addressed through CoMT as "a process of acknowledging and working with the implicit structures and values of the context, with its emphasis on community development, self-definition of need, and the offer of various holistic health and social care resources" (p. 294). While music is an expression of one's "internal world," it is also an "act of transformation" (p. 288). In his work with populations under high stress, Stewart finds that music helps express reality and provides a place to create it as well. This particular community project does not involve an audience, unlike the usual definition of CoMT.

There is still considerable work and education needed in order to achieve social justice in our societies, an observation that was reflected through poetry and mandalas as part of my arts-based research doctoral study (Vaillancourt, 2009). As seen in these examples, CoMT is well suited to serve social justice. Music by its own nature creates a gathering space for working toward common good.

Discussion

New Horizons for Music Therapy

This paper is a starting point for more exploration of CoMT and its possible impact on social justice. We can wonder if music therapists would be more inclined to orient their practices to CoMT if they received the necessary support and mentoring. Furthermore, the idea that CoMT can serve as a vehicle for social justice advocacy necessitates music therapy training as well as social and cultural studies. Future implications might include the following:

1. Teaching or mentoring apprentice music therapists for social issues
2. Teaching leadership through experiential learning

3. Developing abilities to become a social justice ambassador, agent, or leader through CoMT
4. Developing abilities to enhance potential social justice leaders in CoMT practice
5. Passing on knowledge and experience to future generations

Music therapists might need more guidance in pursuing this type of work through CoMT. We may need, for example, to increase our knowledge about conflict resolution and social injustice. We could possibly integrate feminist music therapy into training to serve as a framework to address social justice. Wood (2006) proposes a CoMT matrix to plan, practice, and evaluate CoMT practices. It might be appropriate to use his descriptions of the abilities needed to serve issues of social justice such as collaborating with the community, the media, human rights groups, and social justice associations and organizations. It will also be essential to look at music therapists' ideas of social justice based on their sociocultural experiences in order to address social and cultural countertransference issues.

The new generation of music therapists seems interested in working in the community on issues of social justice, but they are also struggling to define themselves as new professionals. This situation is conveyed in the preresearch pilot project that put the foundations of the author's dissertation (Vaillancourt, 2009) in place. In addition, music therapists who want to promote social justice and conflict resolution through their work need more substantial support and training (Shelley Snow, personal communication, November 16, 2007).

A future avenue to explore might be to use participatory action research and arts-based research to collectively uncover new directions, new ways of thinking, and new knowledge that could contribute to CoMT practices and social justice. CoMT is a multidimensional approach

with roots in music, sociology, psychology, and education—all of which could benefit from reciprocal collaboration.

Another aspect that could be interesting is to study CoMT and social justice from a systems thinking approach. CoMT involves several actors and systems. Such a framework could help music therapists better understand the dynamics in play. The publication of *The Field of Play* (Kenny, 1989) is a theoretical and practical example of systems thinking in the realm of music therapy.

Conclusion

CoMT as a sociomusical intervention offers a potential vehicle for social justice advocacy through music and community building. This music therapy orientation allows clinical and marginalized populations to have access to a larger community and can provide a sense of equality. CoMT has great potential for developing a sense of belonging, solidarity, accomplishment, and freedom, as well as bringing together privileged and nonprivileged or excluded groups.

CoMT also provides a fertile and supportive ground for social justice to be voiced. In my opinion, by making music accessible to a larger community, CoMT greatly contributes to the societal integration of clients who face various physical, psychological, cognitive, and social challenges, allowing them to partake in experiences of beauty and sharing.

Many creative projects are possible using the CoMT model, and music therapists should be encouraged to explore these new avenues and to write about their work. These projects providing equal access to resources and human development are tributes to social justice.

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