

# Taking it to the streets

## The National Youth Council gets mobile radio license

**Fred Campbell**

**T**he National Youth Council (NYC) of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is the first Caribbean NGO to be granted a five-year mobile community radio license. The station was born in 1996 when the government broke its monopoly over the airwaves opening FM frequencies to private broadcasters. The NYC's programming provides a stark contrast to the commercial stations sharing the FM dial; stations like Hits FM, We FM and Nice Radio serve the predictable mix of music, talk shows and call-in programs.

The context of these Caribbean islands offers a dynamic perspective on the development of community radio. While there are more than 100 islands in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, only eight are populated. The main island, St. Vincent, is about 18 miles long and extremely mountainous. The total population of all the islands is about 107,000. Given the relatively small size of the area, most residents know each other if only by sight, and by consequence even many "official" decisions are made by word-of-mouth negotiation. Such are the circumstances surrounding the NYC being granted a five year mobile license without any specific use restrictions and without the NYC having a concrete plan of operations; not even on how powerful the transmitter will be or where it will come from. The NYC must now decide in what direction to take its fledgling station.

The potential of community radio was demonstrated with the completion of the

NYC's first radio project in Overland in 1995, believed to be a significant factor in warming the authorities to the NYC's request for a license. In August of this year, the youth council organized another community radio project at the work study camp in Belair.

The camp — also sponsored by the Caribbean Federation of Youth — lured participants not only from the local village but from various Caribbean countries. St. Lucia, Montserrat, Barbados, Trinidad and St. Kitts all took part in the programs broadcast from the local school in Belair.

The radio station alternated between locations in the camp, broadcasting from either a classroom studio or the main hall where a variety of live broadcasts of events such as the camp opening and talent show took place. Listeners also heard Belair community presentations, and a religious serv-

ice as well as discussions on family violence and other regional issues.

The National Youth Council is an umbrella organization for more than 40 local autonomous youth groups from different communities in SVG. Radio committee chair-



Cleveland Sam shows how to adjust transmitter frequency at Camp 1995

person Arthur Bobb notes that, although the NYC has a mandate to implement national community development programs, "each program takes place in a concrete way in a *local* community of a different geographic area." He says that interactive community radio operating within the framework of youth council activities would mean the "voice of the community itself would be more articulated and there would be a more dynamic relationship between the community organization that the NYC works with and the community at large."

While the portable community radio model seems like a natural fit, the youth council is not totally dismissing the idea of a permanently fixed station. For the past decade, it has produced weekly programming on national radio. The NYC functions as an educational and advocacy group on many issues including AIDS awareness, drug abuse, gender, the environment, and community development, to name a few. Given this mandate, the possibility of advocating on these issues at a national level with its *own* radio station is definitely attractive. A station broadcasting across the country could also be a very effective means of sustaining national cultural traditions such as Vincentian calypso. Unfortunately, it would also be a very expensive option requiring repeater transmitters to accom-



Natasha Conliffe on air at Camp 1997