Programme Content of Mang'elete FM Community Radio as a Stimulus for Economic Development in Rural Kenya: A Case Study of Mang'elete FM in Makueni County

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Abstract

Community radio plays a significant role in promoting grassroots participation and economic empowerment in rural areas where mainstream media often overlook local socioeconomic concerns. This study examined the programme content of Mang'elete FM and its contribution to economic development in Makueni County, Kenya. Guided by Media Dependency Theory, the study explored how residents depend on community radio for information, orientation, and practical knowledge that influence economic decision-making. A mixed-methods case study design was adopted involving 274 respondents comprising 267 listeners and 7 key informants drawn from Makueni County's seven sub-counties. Data were collected using questionnaires and in-depth interviews and analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Findings revealed that Mang'elete FM broadcasts predominantly in the Kamba language, enhancing accessibility and audience engagement. The station's programmes on agriculture, microfinance, health, and market access contributed to improved farming practices, participation in savings groups, increased household income, and enhanced government responsiveness to community concerns. The study concludes that vernacular and context-specific community radio programming can stimulate sustainable economic development in rural communities. The findings provide practical insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to strengthen rural economic empowerment through community media.

Keywords: Community Radio; Programme Content; Economic Development; Media Dependency Theory; Participatory Communication; Rural Kenya; Mang'elete FM

Introduction

Community radio has emerged as one of the most powerful and accessible tools for grassroots participation and local empowerment in rural Africa, particularly in regions where commercial and mainstream media often overlook the daily realities of marginalised populations (Khumalo, 2026; Komodromos, 2021). Owned and driven by the communities they serve, community radio stations broadcast in local languages, prioritise participatory programming, and address context-specific needs that national media frequently ignore (Moffat et al., 2024). In Kenya, where 68.9% of the population lives in rural areas and arid and semi-arid regions cover 90% of the landmass while housing 38% of the country's people, community radio plays a vital role in bridging information gaps caused by limited internet access, sporadic extension services, and infrastructural challenges (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024; World Bank, 2025).

A growing body of evidence shows that community radio can serve as a catalyst for economic development by disseminating actionable knowledge on agriculture, microfinance, market access, and service delivery, thereby enabling informed decision-making, collective advocacy, and tangible improvements in household welfare (Adebayo, 2022; Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2023; Yaya Sada, 2022). Mang'elete FM, established on 22 February 2004 as Kenya's first community radio station, exemplifies this potential. Founded by 33 women's groups from Nthongoni, Ivingoni, and Masongaleni in Kibwezi East under the Mang'elete Community Integrated Development Project, the station operates under the Kamba slogan "wasya wa maeendeyo" (voice of development). With approximately 80% of Makueni County's population being Kamba speakers, Mang'elete FM broadcasts predominantly in the Kamba language, supplemented by limited segments in Maasai and Swahili to ensure inclusivity (Government of Makueni County, 2023). Its programming deliberately focuses on locally identified economic issues such as farming innovations, water resource management, micro-entrepreneurship, health, and market linkages, while creating platforms for listeners to voice concerns and engage directly with county governments and NGOs (Government of Makueni County, 2023).

This study examines the programme content of Mang'elete FM and its relationship to economic development in Makueni County. Grounded in Media Dependency Theory, the research explores how, in information-scarce rural environments, residents develop strong reliance on community radio for orientation, understanding, and actionable knowledge that translates into economic empowerment (Kim, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). By analysing how Mang'elete FM's vernacular, place-specific content fosters audience dependency and collective mobilisation, the study highlights the mechanisms through which community radio can stimulate sustainable economic progress. As Kenya advances toward Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth, this research offers replicable insights into how community radio can serve as a powerful mechanism for rural economic development across Kenya and similar contexts in sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

Literature Review

Economic Development in Rural Kenya

Economic development in rural Kenya is fundamentally predicated on enhancing household welfare, productive capacity, and equitable access to resources rather than on mere aggregate growth metrics (World Bank, 2025). Existing data shows the persistence of structural barriers in arid and semi-arid regions, where recurrent droughts, limited market integration, and deficient infrastructure continue cycles of poverty (Government of Makueni County, 2023; Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Within Makueni County, the gross county product remains modest, ranking 28th nationally, while per capita income hovers at approximately KSh 110,320, reflecting constrained economic output (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

Empirical studies conducted between 2021 and 2025 demonstrate that targeted informational interventions can break these cycles by fostering agricultural development, financial inclusion, and responsive service delivery (Adebayo, 2022; Yaya Sada, 2022). In particular, community-based media have been shown to enhance smallholder productivity through the dissemination of drought-tolerant crop varieties, market intelligence, and microfinance literacy, consequently contributing toward measurable improvements in household income and resilience (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2023).

Programme Content of Community Radio Stations

Programme content within African community radio stations is distinguished by its participatory orientation, linguistic accessibility, and contextual relevance (Khumalo, 2026; Komodromos, 2021). Unlike commercial broadcasters, community stations prioritise content that emanates from and responds to community-identified needs, encompassing agriculture, health, entrepreneurship, and governance accountability (Moffat et al., 2024). In the Kenyan context, vernacular programming has proven vital in overcoming literacy and linguistic challenges prevalent in rural populations (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2023).

Mang'elete FM represents this model through its deliberate integration of Kamba-language segments on agribusiness, water harvesting, and savings groups. Such content informs and actively stimulates behavioural change by aligning broadcast schedules with listeners' daily routines, morning policy conversations for community leaders, and midday socioeconomic programmes for farmers and traders (Government of Makueni County, 2023).

Effectiveness of Community Radio in Attaining Economic Development

The effectiveness of community radio as a developmental instrument has been empirically confirmed across multiple African settings. Studies indicate that stations fostering listener dependency via consistent, credible, and actionable content achieve higher rates of knowledge adoption, collective advocacy, and policy responsiveness (Adebayo, 2022; Moffat et al., 2024). In Makueni, Mang'elete FM's programming has precipitated tangible interventions, including county-sponsored boreholes, upgrades to medical facilities, and compensation schemes for human-wildlife conflict (Kenya Wildlife Service, 2020; Government of Makueni County, 2023).

Nevertheless, operational constraints, such as regulatory limitations on advertising revenue and infrastructural vulnerabilities, frequently attenuate the possible impact (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2023). These findings show the necessity of examining programme content not in isolation but as a flexible dependency mechanism capable of translating information into sustained economic empowerment.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded exclusively in Media Dependency Theory (also referred to as Media Systems Dependency Theory). Originally conceptualised by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur and refined in contemporary applications, the theory argues that the degree of dependency upon media systems varies according to the availability of alternative information sources and the salience of individual and social goals (Kim, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Dependency intensifies in contexts of high uncertainty or resource scarcity, where media fulfil three primary functions: orientation (providing cognitive maps of opportunities), understanding (making sense of complex realities), and action (facilitating behavioural responses).

In rural Makueni, where alternative channels such as digital platforms and extension services are limited, residents show a strong dependence on Mang'elete FM's programme content. This linkage is not passive; it generates active engagement through call-ins, text messages, and community outreach, thereby boosting the station's influence on economic behaviours. The theory further explains why vernacular, place-specific content generates stronger effects than generic national broadcasts: it satisfies contextually relevant needs, encouraging trust and behavioural change (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2023).

By applying Media Dependency Theory, this study illuminates the means through which Mang'elete FM's programming transforms informational dependency into assessable economic outcomes.

Methodology

The research adopted a mixed-methods case study design to facilitate triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data and to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between Mang'elete FM programme content and economic development in Makueni County. The target population comprised approximately 800 active listeners of Mang'elete FM identified through their participation in call-ins, text messaging, and outreach activities across Makueni County's seven sub-counties namely Makueni, Kaiti, Kilome, Kibwezi East, Kibwezi West, Nzaui, and Kathonzweni (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

A purposively selected sample of 274 respondents was drawn, comprising 267 listeners and 7 key informants, including 5 journalists and 2 senior administrative staff stationed at the headquarters in Mang'elete town. Purposive sampling enabled the selection of respondents with direct engagement and experience with the station's programming, while snowball sampling facilitated the identification of additional participants with relevant knowledge and diverse demographic characteristics, including occupation, education, age, and gender.

Data collection instruments included structured questionnaires administered to listeners and in-depth interview schedules administered to key informants in community settings and at the station between May and December 2021. To maximise accessibility and inclusivity, all instruments were translated and administered in Kamba, Maasai, and Swahili.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations, while qualitative data were coded, categorised, and analysed thematically using the qualitative analytical process framework to identify recurring patterns and themes. To ensure validity, the research instruments underwent pilot testing, expert review, and member checking procedures. Reliability of scaled items was confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding 0.80. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed through obtaining informed consent, ensuring voluntary participation, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, and securing institutional approval from Rongo University.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=267 listeners)

Characteristic	Category	Percentage (%)
Level of Education	Primary	35.0
	Secondary	41.5
	Tertiary	23.5
Primary Economic Activity	Agriculture only	40.8
	Agriculture & Pastoralism	17.7
	Small business	30.0
	Casual labour	11.5
	Agriculture-related total	58.8
Approximate Monthly Income (KSh)	500 – 5,000	38.1
	6,000 – 9,000	54.2
	Above 10,000	7.7
Years in Current Occupation	1–10 years	25.4
	11–20 years	38.5
	Over 20 years	36.2

Source: Field data (2021)

The Role of Programme Content of Mang'elete FM in Promoting Economic Development

Empirical findings show that Mang'elete FM's programme content is accessible and relevant. Quantitative data indicate that 88.5% of respondents fully comprehend broadcasts due to the predominant use of the Kamba language, with real-time translations provided for expert contributions in English or Swahili. This linguistically oriented strategy is consistent with listeners' educational profiles: 41.5% possess secondary education and 23.5% tertiary qualifications, while also including lower-literacy segments (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

The programme content is intentionally tailored to local conditions, addressing Makueni's arid environment through segments on drought-resistant crops, such as green grams, rainwater harvesting, microfinance literacy, and market linkages. Morning programmes include policy discussions with agricultural officers and county officials, while midday and evening slots are designed for farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs during peak agricultural activity periods. Qualitative responses highlight the transformative potential of this content; as one respondent from Kibwezi East sub-county stated: "The farming tips in Kamba helped me switch to drought-resistant varieties and increase my yields."

Effectiveness of Mang'elete FM in Promoting Economic Development

The station's effectiveness is evidenced by multiple indicators of economic empowerment. Of the 267 listeners surveyed, 88.5% attributed measurable improvements in their economic circumstances to Mang'elete FM programmes. Specifically, 62.3% reported joining Savings and Credit Co-operative societies or table-banking groups, gaining access to affordable credit for agricultural inputs and small enterprises. Monthly income data further show impact: while the median earnings remain modest at KSh 12,000, 62.3% of respondents noted increases attributable to programme-inspired practices (Government of Makueni County, 2023).

Table 2: Key Economic Outcomes Attributed to Mang'elete FM Programmes (N=267)

Outcome	Percentage of Respondents (%)	Example Interventions
Improved understanding of content	88.5	Kamba-language agriculture & microfinance
Joined SACCOs / table-banking groups	62.3	Access to loans for farming & business
Increased monthly income due to programmes	62.3	Adoption of drought-resistant crops
Government/NGO action prompted by station	Majority (qualitative)	Boreholes, KSh 500 health scheme, wildlife fencing & KSh 96.5 million compensation

Source: Field data (2021)

Issues raised during broadcasts prompted county government interventions, including the drilling of boreholes in drought-prone wards, the construction of dispensaries, and the rollout of an affordable healthcare plan at KSh 500 annually. Nationally, human-wildlife conflict concerns led to the installation of partial electric fencing around Tsavo National Park and to compensation payments totaling KSh 96.5 million between 2016 and 2019 (Kenya Wildlife Service, 2020). These results show Media Dependency Theory in operation: dependency upon credible local information motivated group efforts and institutional responsiveness.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite notable successes, several structural challenges constrain Mang'elete FM's full potential. Leadership disputes among the 33 women's groups occasionally disrupt strategic unity, while frequent power outages stemming from high electricity costs lead to unscheduled off-air periods. Regulatory provisions under the Broadcasting Regulations (2019) prohibit advertising of high-revenue categories such as alcohol and gambling, limiting financial sustainability relative to commercial competitors (Communications Authority of Kenya, 2009).

Table 3: Major Challenges and Suggested Areas for Improvement

Challenge	% of Respondents / Key Informants Highlighting	Suggested Improvement
Leadership disputes/governance	14.29	Merit-based leadership and new constitution
Restrictive advertising regulations	28.57	Policy liberalization for sponsorships
Unreliable electricity/power outages	High (qualitative)	Backup power solutions and capacity building
Limited expert involvement	34.20	More agricultural and financial specialists on air
Inconsistent marketing/visibility	14.29	Enhanced outreach and digital integration

Source: Field data (2021)

Wider Implications for Community Radio and Economic Development

The case of Mang'elete FM demonstrates how programme content can foster media dependency relations that support sustainable economic development in rural Africa. This model, characterized by vernacular accessibility, place-specific relevance, participatory dialogue, and follow-up mechanisms, provides a replicable framework for other counties facing similar agro-ecological and socioeconomic challenges. Policymakers are encouraged to establish specialized response units within county governments to systematically address issues raised by community radio, and to support hybrid digital enhancements and expert integration to expand reach.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the programme content of Mang'elete FM serves as an effective catalyst for economic development in Makueni County. Applying Media Dependency Theory, the research finds that the station's vernacular and contextually relevant broadcasts have fostered increased audience dependency, resulting in informed decision-making, collective advocacy, and measurable improvements in service delivery. Although challenges remain, the evidence availed confirms the capacity of community radio to advance Sustainable Development Goal 8 when programme content is strategically developed and supported by appropriate policies. Future research should investigate long-term effects and scalability across diverse rural contexts.

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