



**COMMUNITY VOICE
IS HARD TO DEFINE.
WE'RE TRYING
ANYWAY.**

BY HEENA SINGHAL

In development sector meetings across India, the same phrases echo repeatedly. "We must listen to communities." "We must center the voices of the marginalized." The consensus seems absolute: **community voice matters**. But ask the room to define it — to say what power looks like when it is genuinely redistributed, and how you know the difference between real participation and its performance — and the clarity dissolves.

We must acknowledge that if we genuinely listened to communities — not consulted them, not quoted them, but let what they know change what we do — we would have to redesign programs based on what communities tell us is broken. Most institutions are not ready for that. And without a shared definition of what community voice actually means, no one is accountable for whether it is happening at all. That is the problem this series sets out to address.

Video Volunteers has spent over two decades trying to work this out — not in theory, but on the ground. Here is what we have learned.

Voice is a body of knowledge — but only if you build a method to receive it.

[Finding Voice: Lessons from Listening for Community Insights](#) is our most foundational piece of research on this. Community-generated content is not raw material waiting to be processed by experts — it is already knowledge. But you need a method to hear it. Over two years, we built and tested one: following communities into the content they were already creating, combining human analysis and AI-assisted review to find the patterns inside it.

Having a platform is not the same as having a voice

In [The Power of Everyone's Voice](#), we studied YouTube and found that the socially excluded were largely absent as first-person storytellers. The gatekeeping had moved from editors to algorithms — but it had not disappeared. Voice is not democratized simply because the technology exists. **But a voice can be built.** [Beyond Likes: How Grassroots Leaders Are Defining the Future of Digital Advocacy](#) followed 117 Community Content Creators over a year as they moved from hesitant social media users to influential voices reaching thousands. Voice is not a natural endowment unevenly distributed. It is a capacity that can be developed — if institutions invest in developing it.

Communities speak about more than what you ask them.

[How We Used AI to Hear Health Beyond Hospitals](#) analysed 472 community video transcripts and found that health crises surface not just in health videos, but in footage about water, caste, education, and governance. A pregnant woman in Barabanki avoids her local facility because there are no

The problem is not that communities are voiceless. It is that they are systemically unheard.

AI may be the first technology that can actually listen to communities

But why does supporting citizens to use their voice matter? What does that investment actually produce?

female doctors. A medical officer in Jharkhand admits the labour ward cannot be used. These were not tagged as health content. But they were health evidence. If you only listen for what you are looking for, you miss what communities are actually telling you.

No Voice Left Behind makes this case directly: certain groups are dismissed not because they have nothing to say, but because those with power choose not to hear. And *Where Do Grievances Go?* shows what this looks like in practice — for communities navigating barriers of language, documentation, and digital literacy, filing a complaint is often where the process ends, not begins. The infrastructure of listening has been built. The intention to hear has not.

Communities do not speak in numbers or spreadsheets. They speak in words, stories, and questions grounded in their lived experience. In the age of qualitative data, deploying AI to make sense of these narratives is a real possibility. *Rural India Is Ready for AI, But Is AI?* documents first-generation young women from tribal communities who, given two days of guided support, were asking AI about scholarships, health, and their futures. In our interviews with ten CCs, we found them already using AI to draft scripts, research government schemes, write police complaints, and replace the middlemen villagers once paid to navigate bureaucracy. People told us they felt heard when they used AI — something web search never managed. This use case is real. But it has to be actively supported. Connectivity gaps, gendered norms, and caste barriers are still the walls around them. Access on paper is not access in life.

Partnership Plus Persistence answers that directly. When officials genuinely open themselves to communities as partners rather than petitioners, citizens become dramatically more effective advocates. Cases resolved rose 59% in a single year. Over 8 million people were impacted. What changed was not the CCs — same people, same regions, same issues. What changed was the quality of listening on the official side, when they heard citizen voices as an invitation to co-create. This echoed in the survey conducted by our research partners at the University of Virginia, who interviewed Block Development Officers and other officials across Jharkhand. They found that access to citizen voice increased empathy, attentiveness to citizen priorities, and a sense of upward accountability. Listening to citizen voices brings tangible, measurable benefits to officials. You don't have to be a deep believer in participation and bottom-up change to see the value in that.

Listening well, by those in power, is not a courtesy. It is a multiplier. Voice and listening are not separate things. They are two halves of the same act.

This is what twenty-five years has taught us. It also urges me to ask: If all our programs are working fine, then why are we still working on the same issues? Why is progress happening so slowly on our issues? And why do rural citizens not feel that power is shifting towards them in any way? Listening better will help us shift power.

You cannot get there without accountability. And you cannot have accountability without a shared definition — one that means the same thing whether you are a funder, an NGO, or a CC standing in a government office. Right now "we listened to communities" could mean a survey, a focus group, or a CC who documented a broken handpump and got it fixed. Without clarity, everything counts and nothing also counts. That is why, over the coming months, we will propose a working definition of community voice, lay out guiding principles, and introduce a toolkit to measure it— not as finished frameworks, but as drafts to be tested and challenged. The definition is not the destination. It is what makes the destination reachable. And we cannot build this alone.

If you are a funder, an NGO grappling with the gap between consultation and real participation, or a local changemaker with hard-won insight into what works — we want you in this process. Not as an audience. As a co-listener and co-creator of a sector that is finally ready to act on what it hears.

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