

UNIVERSITY  
OF TASMANIA

# **Bottom-up Driven Community Empowerment: the case of African Communities in Australia**

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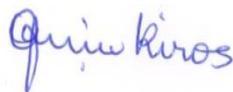
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The Tasmanian Social Science Human Research Ethics Committee granted this research full application approval (reference number H11705) on 11 June 2011.



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## Abstract

The idea of community empowerment has emerged as a possible response to the failure of welfare policies. However, there are arguments in the literature that there is a disconnection between empowerment theory and practice and that it is difficult to implement 'empowerment' approaches. In this thesis, a conceptual and analytical framework has been developed by integrating empowerment theorisation and institutional analysis to guide the conduct of research. Ethnographic case studies of African communities were conducted in South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria. For over a year, the researcher participated in community activities as a participant observer, conducted 50 interviews, attended more than 40 events, and collected relevant documents. The study suggests that the empowerment of migrant communities should be theorised in a new way – in relation to migration and settlement, community formation, and interactions among communities, governments and NGOs.

The study demonstrated that contexts such as migration and settlement experiences affect the empowerment of African communities. Community formation is identified as the primary mechanism communities used to attain empowerment. The internal dynamics of communities, social conditions such as community partnerships, leadership and social incidents, cultural and financial resources, and existing rules and policies were found to influence the empowerment of African communities. Social incidents facilitated empowerment by creating political and social context for communities to gain support from governments and NGOs. The study identified governments and NGOs as the key external actors in the empowerment of African communities. These actors developed the resources and structures necessary for empowerment and their interactions with African communities shaped empowerment outcomes.

These findings demonstrate that empowerment is attained through the creation of social, political, cultural and institutional space where power is shared with and not exercised over others – where it is relational and not necessarily confrontational. The study suggests that policies and programs that take into account the contexts and dynamics of communities are likely to succeed in achieving better empowerment outcomes for communities. The study contributes to knowledge both by providing an understanding of bottom-up driven community empowerment and by developing a conceptual and analytical framework that can guide empowerment studies. However, the generalisability of this study should be considered with caution due to its focus on African communities. Further studies that examine the perspectives of other communities and the roles of governments, NGOs and the private sector in the empowerment of disadvantaged communities in Australia are required.

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