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# Using Theatre to Involve the Public in AIDS Education

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**D**rama and theatre arts, activities that are popularized during the annual Kenya Schools and Drama Festivals, are starting to make a national impact, not just in the usual arena of entertainment but in health awareness.

To the youth of Machakos town, drama and theatre have become new partners in the war against HIV/AIDS. The new partners are driving home a message that previously had not been heeded, namely the need for taking precautions against the pandemic. The initiative, based on the Participatory Interactive Media Model (PIMM) was initiated by SANAA Arts Promotions, a local theatre and arts based Non-Governmental Organisation that deals with social awareness.

The first phase of the project, so far implemented in four of the eight provinces of Nairobi, Coast, Eastern and Central, is funded through the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. It aims at imparting knowledge on the PIMM strategy to theatre based youth groups so that they can in turn act as peer educators in their respective regions.

According to Mr Chris Agutu, SANAA's Nairobi Provincial Coordinator, PIMM "is based on the assumption that various communities have home-grown solutions to their problems. We therefore guide the community through the various steps of identifying key problematic issues and build their capacities through education to solve these problems. However, we do not give out monetary assistance."

PIMM utilises visual and performing arts in the form of short skits and

poems performed during community outreaches, as well as painted murals to communicate messages on HIV/AIDS.

Although the 2003 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) indicated that HIV prevalence rates dropped from nine to seven per cent, there is still concern that knowledge of HIV prevention measures and behaviour change was low, with 58 per cent of women and 70 per cent of men interviewed who knew that the risk of getting HIV would be reduced by using condoms and limiting sex to one faithful partner.

The same is echoed by Mr Agutu who says, "We have discovered that though AIDS awareness is high, there are myths and misconceptions being held that still drive people into risky behaviour, thus minimising behaviour change."

The panoramic view of Kenyans' sexual mores and the different ways in which various cultures have built secrecy around the area of human sexuality and sex is also a factor in the continued spread of the disease. "It is our experience that people still shy off from openly discussing sex because it is traditionally viewed as a private affair and hence taboo," says Mr Agutu.

However, Ms Carol Odongo, the theatre supervisor at SANAA says, "Most of the sensitive issues concerning sex become easier to discuss using various characters in a skit and then requesting the audience to put themselves in that character's shoes, a method called 'role play.'"

It is through role play that the PIMM strategy has acquired admirers. Here, the SANAA cast members en-

gage the audience by turning tables and asking them to act out how they would react in certain situations considered to involve risky behaviour. "It becomes easier to engage the audience in this way as role playing acts as an ice breaker, and due to its interactive and participatory nature, it becomes much easier to communicate sensitive issues," says Ms Odongo.

Ms Odongo adds that SANAA members quickly assemble scripts backstage while the facilitator engages the audience in identifying their problems known as 'dilemmas.' The resultant solutions are known as 'options.' From 'templates' created from these dilemmas and options, murals are conceived and painted on the walls. In this way, other members of the public are reached.

Mark Ombiri, an actor with SANAA, says, "It is quite challenging to come up with a script in such a short time but we have learnt to coordinate well and improvise when on stage." Ombiri, who stays in Pumwani's Majengo slum, has personal experience of just how much peer pressure affects young people. He says, "I use real life experiences from the slums as I act to make it more real and relate with my audience as well. Most people in slum areas are illiterate; theatre makes it easier to communicate."

For the youth groups Destiny Pursuers and Krewenzi in Machakos—who underwent a three-day training session on the PIMM strategy—it was a worthwhile experience. Ruth Mwendé of Krewenzi says, "The training session has enabled us to learn a lot about audience participation which is a key element of the PIMM strat-

egy and is crucial for behaviour change.”

Mwende, who is eighteen years old and finished secondary school last year, says that her involvement in theatre has kept her from engaging in risky behaviour while at the same time educating the wider community. “It is easier to discuss issues related to sex and HIV/AIDS in the form of theatre as we do not get embarrassed when addressing older people and it is also entertaining, hence a crowd puller,” she says.

Sarah Shikuku, a student at the Pivot College in Machakos, who attended a mini-outreach activity organised by the Destiny Pursuers and Krewenzi youth groups after their training session, was all praise saying, “The use of drama makes the learning process more memorable and enjoyable as the role play makes us articulate whatever issues that are affecting us more clearly.”

Given the fact that young people between the ages of 19 and 24 years comprise 36 per cent of the Kenyan population, Sarah—who thinks that the PIMM strategy is a lifeline for the youth—says, “The use of drama will help to capture and sustain the attention of young people, thus saving more lives.”

In its 2004 report, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS stressed the need to involve young people at the core of any AIDS strategy. It says, “When young people are given appropriate tools and support, they can become powerful agents for change.” The SANAA Arts group is setting out to prove this fact.



## Encouraging Behaviour Change Through Drama – A Skit

This play encourages faithfulness in order to diminish the threat of HIV/AIDS. It is performed in the vernacular (Gikuyu)<sup>1</sup> by a church-related youth group.

In a certain village there lived a man and a woman. The man's name was Muwira<sup>2</sup> and the woman's Nyakio.<sup>2</sup> They lived together as man and wife. The two were very, very hard working. They had a small farm. As expected, when the season came for preparing the land, they were ready to work. They cleared the land and since they were extremely hard working, they cleared even for their neighbour. Then it was time to dig, they did the same, even for the neighbour.

Soon the rains fell and it was time to plant. They planted and planted and even forgot the boundary. They helped their neighbours! Oh.....they were always busier than bees. Great! The tilling season came. Muwira and Nyakio were busy again. They tilled and tilled and once again were glad to help their neighbour. They were wonderful neighbours, weren't they?

After five months, the maize was ready. It was time to enjoy the fruit of their hard work. They decided to start with the maize in the neighbour's farm. That wasn't greedy of them, was it? They had cleared, dug and tilled the land, so why not enjoy the fruits of their labour?

The neighbour noticed that his maize was disappearing. He had to get rid of the thief. He thought and thought. He decided to poison the maize! Oh....Muwira and Nyakio weren't aware of the poisoning. They consumed the maize. The poisoned maize! Imagine! There they were, two very active people, dying because of 'HARD WORK.'

Beware, the maize is poisoned. Don't encroach on a neighbour's garden! Keep to your farm, respect the boundary!

### Notes

1 Translated by Juliette Wanjira Wambui.

2 In Gikuyu, these names mean "hardworking."