



## Soul City, South Africa:

### Partnering with the media and civil society in achieving social change

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**In 1996, an article was published in *AIDS/STD Health Promotion Exchange*, a predecessor of *Exchange*, on the new multimedia programme Soul City.<sup>1</sup> The programme was started in late 1992 and comprised a package of radio, television and educational materials with the aim of getting health promotion information to the widest possible audience. The project identified disadvantaged black South Africans – especially young women in lower income groups – as the primary target audience.**

A year-long consultative research process was undertaken to ensure that materials were of the highest standard. Focus groups of target communities pre-viewed pilots of the first radio and TV episodes. The scripts had to be true to life and educate, yet contain enough dramatic elements to keep the viewers' attention.

Soul City at the time comprised of:

- Television: a weekly half-hour drama series aired during prime time. The series used the drama format to produce 'edutainment' – entertainment with an empowering health promotion message.
- Radio: a 15-minute daily serial aired in Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho languages on South Africa's three largest radio stations.
- Newspapers: a 36-page, full-colour booklet was serialized in the major newspapers over three months; 600,000 booklets were distributed in the newspapers. Additional copies were distributed by clinics and at petrol stations countrywide.
- A public relations and advertising campaign: developing editorials, competitions, and a range of actuality programmes to popularize the series and to use the actors as advocates, placing health issues on the public agenda.

- An education package: using audio, video and written materials adapted from the mass media, for formal and informal educational settings.

### Expansion and consolidation

The programme concentrated on: safe motherhood, breastfeeding, infant nutrition, diarrhoea, respiratory disease, child abuse and accidents. Other sub-themes integrated into the stories included community and women's empowerment, stigma, social issues such as co-parenting, community action, nation building, and, last but not least, communication about sexuality and HIV/AIDS awareness (see Box).

Since then, Soul City has developed into the Soul City: Institute for Health and Development Communication (SC: IHDC). It has won a range of awards locally and internationally for 'best practice' and innovation. The organization has expanded the scope of its work to include *Soul Buddyz*, a multi-media initiative aimed at 8-12 year olds and their caregivers. Soul Buddyz consists of a television drama coupled with a radio programme and print material for children and caregivers. A national network of Soul Buddyz Clubs have been established at schools and libraries across South Africa to build on the health promotion work of the Soul Buddyz multi-media vehicle. The clubs encourage community activism amongst young children and are for children by children. More recently, a television programme called *Buddyz on the Move* has been developed as an inspirational tool, to showcase the work of clubs.

### The key to success

The two vehicles have huge reach with Soul City reaching 79% of the South African population and Soul Buddyz reaching 68% of children. Independent studies cite greater brand knowledge of Soul City when com-



pared to Coca Cola.<sup>2</sup> Soul City has produced seven series so far and Soul Buddyz is now in its third. Numerous evaluations have demonstrated significant impact in terms of social change.<sup>2</sup> Previously disadvantaged black South Africans are still the main target audience of Soul City but it has been expanded by including a greater representation of diversity in the characters. Soul Buddyz is aimed at all children and caregivers regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic background.

The life-skills materials are used in schools and the educational packages, adapted from the television series, are distributed widely within the country. Fifteen NGOs have been trained as master trainers and, using a cascade model, train others to use the educational packages.

### **Avoiding ‘Soul City/Buddyz fatigue’**

We believe that the key to our success is rigorous formative research that ensures our materials resonate with our audiences and have the desired impact. People speak of our series mirroring their lives. Also, our constant evaluations ensure that we learn important lessons, which are applied to the development of the next series. The careful building and marketing of the Soul City brand as well as strategic use of popular actors has also helped in our success. We have always relied on a ‘win-win’ strategy, which balances the benefits for the programme with those for the broadcasting corporations. This has allowed us to bring in massive audiences and helped the broadcaster fulfil its public broadcasting mandate.

### **HIV/AIDS and sexuality messages**

Over the years messages on HIV/AIDS prevention, care, treatment, support and related issues such as sexuality and sexual decision-making have been included in the Soul City series and materials. Some of these messages are that with antiretroviral treatment, HIV/AIDS is a chronic disease, no longer a death sentence; you cannot know you are HIV negative unless you are tested; responsible partners support and care for each other; you can benefit from disclosure; have an HIV test if you want to have a baby; ART is not a cure but it makes HIV a manageable condition like hypertension or diabetes, etc.

Further, Soul City pays a lot of attention on gender inequality and promotes the norm that men and women are equal and have the right to make their own choices around sex; young men can control their sexual urges and this will not have negative physical or psychological consequences (directly addressing a common misconception); love does not equal sex or material goods; forced sex is rape, even if it is your boyfriend, etc. Masculinity messages promoting men as carers and the notion that “you can be a different man from peer expectations” are also addressed.

Young people often experience these messages as eye-openers, as one young female respondent stated in the evaluation of the fourth series: “It [Soul City] made me to know where I stand as an individual. It was able to show me what is wrong and what is right, and it made me to be able to determine where my life is going and what path am I choosing for myself....It has taught me that I should not depend on a man, I should learn to stand on my own, and that I should think for myself, and again I should respect other people... I have rights”.

A young man said: “Me and my friends had a style of changing girl friends to surprise each other. I will bring this girl today and tomorrow a different one – telling ourselves that AIDS has its own people. And we did not use condoms. After watching Soul City with my friend, we realized that AIDS issues must be true... We got a shock and resolved to stick to one girlfriend and use a condom”.

Bearing in mind that research shows that children in the Soul Buddyz target age group have not yet begun experimenting with sex and drugs, issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS are communicated differently from the way one may communicate with older youth. Thus far, Soul Buddyz messages have focussed on helping children to first understand their bodies and accept the feelings that come with the way their bodies change as they get older. Children are also encouraged to know that they have the right not to be touched in ways they do not like. They are also encouraged to identify their feelings and learn to deal with them appropriately, and not to feel ashamed of these feelings. Also Soul Buddyz does encourage measures that prevent pregnancy, HIV and STIs (such as safer sex). Children are encouraged first and foremost to delay sexual onset until they are older. In support of these messages, Soul Buddyz produces a parenting guide to help caregivers communicate messages of sex and sexuality with their children.

Beyond this, Soul Buddyz has also focused on different aspects of HIV/AIDS to raise awareness, dispel myths and convey information, looking at aspects of prevention, care, support and treatment. The series looks at how families, communities and schools can find ways to assist infected and affected children.

### Lessons learned from sustained practice

- Explore win-wins for both the programme and the media.
- Conduct rigorous formative research.
- Evaluate as appropriate.
- Explore multiple strategies to achieve social change.
- Build partnerships with media companies and civil society.



Over 10 years later, Soul City has repositioned itself to ensure it keeps pace with the changing media environment and an increasingly sophisticated media-literate population. The series itself looks quite different from its original form, while still maintaining the elements that have resulted in such an extensive 'brand loyalty.'

We are developing new projects continuously which build on the popularity of the Soul City brand. We are currently involved in a year-long talk show with all public broadcasting radio stations. These shows engage audiences interactively in the issues dealt with in the actual drama vehicles. We are also developing a reality television programme, which will encourage community transformation.

### International scaling up

Soul City has been broadcast in a number of countries throughout the world – as far afield as Surinam and Barbados. Between 1999-2001, Soul City worked on a successful project in Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia where a youth publication called *Choose Life*

was adapted for each country. Over 1,330,000 copies of the booklet were successfully distributed in the four countries in seven different languages.

The three-year process taught Soul City a lot about working regionally. Most valuable has been the lesson learned about the importance of working with good local partners who in turn root the programme within broader initiatives within the country and bring local credibility.

The current Regional Programme is a five-year programme, which seeks to develop media and build local capacity by working with identified partners in eight other sub-Saharan countries. The regional partners are: PSI (Botswana and Malawi), Phela Health and Development Communications (Lesotho), Vida Positiva (Mozambique), Namibian Red Cross Society, Schools Health and Population Programmes (SHAPE, Swaziland), Zambia Centre for Communication Programmes (ZCCP), and Action Magazine (Zimbabwe). The two main aims of the programme are to adapt Soul City media – TV, radio and print – in each of the countries and build local capacity.

The 1996 article stated that the producers hoped that the series would come to rely less heavily on donors. While we do receive substantial commercial sponsorship as well as airtime arrangements with the public broadcaster, we still rely in large part on donor funding, due to the magnitude of our work. We are currently however, exploring other longer-term sustainability options. ■

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1. M. Galloway, Harnessing the media to promote health. *AIDS/STD Health Promotion Exchange*, 4, 1996:

[www.kit.nl/ils/exchange\\_content/html/1996\\_4\\_harnessing\\_the\\_media.asp](http://www.kit.nl/ils/exchange_content/html/1996_4_harnessing_the_media.asp)

2. All evaluation reports can be found on the website [www.soulcity.org.za](http://www.soulcity.org.za).

