



**Text to Change (TTC)**  
—  
**Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED)**

**Using SMS for HIV/AIDS education and expanding the  
use of HIV testing and counselling services at the AIDS  
Information Centre (AIC)**

**Lira, Uganda, February 2010**

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## Contents

Project summary .....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
1 Introduction .....	5
1.1 Current HIV/AIDS situation in Uganda .....	5
1.2 Deutsche Entwicklungsdienst and Text to Change .....	6
1.3 Program objectives.....	6
2 Methods .....	7
2.1 Study population.....	7
2.2 Mobile messages .....	7
2.3 Study procedure .....	7
3 Results .....	8
4 Conclusions .....	11
References .....	14
Annex 1 Questions and messages in SMS quiz.....	15
Annex 2 Testimonials of participants.....	17

## Project summary

<b>Programme Name</b>	Using SMS for HIV/AIDS education and expanding the use of HIV testing and counselling services at the AIDS Information Centre (AIC)
<b>Country</b>	Uganda
<b>Town and Region</b>	Lira (North West Uganda)
<b>Donor</b>	Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED)
<b>Duration</b>	3 weeks, February 2010
<b>Objectives</b>	To improve HIV/AIDS awareness levels and increase the number of people going for HCT services in Lira; resulting in a reduction in the incidence of HIV and an overall improvement in people's quality of life.
<b>Focus Population</b>	Mobile phone users, their partners and people living in Lira and the surrounding communities (using one of four of major networks in Uganda: MTN, UTL, ZAIN or WARID). This population was targeted via radio announcements and flyers , encouraging them to subscribe to the service.
<b>Methods</b>	<i>General messages (radio):</i> a targeted audience of approximately 145,000 people in the North Western region of Uganda were asked to subscribe to the Text to Change HIV/AIDS SMS Quiz.  <i>Targeted messages (SMS):</i> Text to Change targeted a group of 7,000 people in Lira with SMS questions regarding HIV/AIDS awareness and messages to encourage people to go for <b>free</b> HIV testing – provided by the Aids Information Centre (AIC).
<b>Partners</b>	Direct partnerships include: Text to Change, Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED), Lira Municipal Council (LMC) and the AIDS Information Centre (AIC), Lira Branch
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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

In February 2010, The Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED; German Development Service) in collaboration with Text to Change (TTC) and the AIDS Information Centre (AIC) conducted a carried out a project survey in Lira, northern Uganda. The project targeted mobile phone users (on the four major networks in Uganda: MTN, UTL, ZAIN, and WARID), with the aim to improve awareness of HIV/AIDS and increase the number of people going for HCT services in Lira. The project's main objective was to reduce the incidence of HIV and improve people's overall quality of life.

Participants were informed of the project via radio shows and through the distribution of flyers. The radio broadcasts targeted approximately 145,000 people in the Lira region, encouraging them to subscribe to a TTC HIV/AIDS SMS Quiz. TTC also targeted 7,000 people in Lira via SMS with information on free HIV testing, which was being provided by the AIC throughout the duration of the project. This proved to be very successful.

### **Results**

- The DED-TTC survey reached over 7,000 people in the Lira area
- Take up of the SMS survey was high, with more men participating than women
- The average age of participants was 28
- On the whole, participants had a good awareness of the issues surrounding HIV and family planning
- On average, 74% of all questions sent via SMS were answered correctly
- The majority of participants had been tested for HIV at least once, however, only 44% had been tested in the past year. HIV testing at the Lira AIDS Information Centre increased considerably following an SMS reminder of the free service; in fact test uptake doubled.

The levels of awareness of the participants in our survey were high when compared with data from the 2006 Domestic Household Survey (where only 28% of women and 36% of men had any comprehensive awareness of HIV/AIDS). 96% of our participants stated that the survey had helped them to gain new knowledge. (The number of questions in our survey was limited compared to the DHS survey, however, which may have had an impact on the overall outcomes). Our survey also highlighted that women were better informed about family planning issues than men. More importantly, the uptake on testing was much higher than it was in 2006, according to statistics in the DHS report.

During the survey, free testing was provided at the AIDS Information Centre in Lira and as a result, a high number of people came to the centre to be tested. This could suggest that by reducing the financial burden, even more people would be likely to come forward for testing in the future. The SMS survey was highly valued by the participants; almost all stated that they gained more knowledge and awareness from it. SMS constitutes a new and exciting approach for disseminating information that can be widely dispersed directly into people's hands whenever, wherever. Mobile phone technology is steadily growing and mobile phones are now used for far more than just making calls. Like SMS, or text, messaging, users are adopting the devices – and the technology – to completely new ends.

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Current HIV/AIDS situation in Uganda

Current HIV prevalence in Uganda amongst adults is estimated at 5.4%<sup>1</sup> According to the Uganda HIV and AIDS Sero-Behavioural Survey, the number of people living with HIV is higher in urban areas (10.1% prevalence) than rural areas (5.7%); it is also higher amongst women (7.5%) than men (5.0%).<sup>2</sup>

It is feared that HIV prevalence in Uganda may be on the rise again; at best it has reached a plateau whereby the number of new HIV infections equals the number of AIDS-related deaths. There are many theories as to why this may be happening, including the government's shift towards abstinence-based prevention programmes and a general complacency or 'AIDS-fatigue'. It has been suggested that antiretroviral drugs have changed the perception of AIDS from a death sentence to a treatable, manageable disease; this may have reduced the fear surrounding HIV, and in turn has led to an increase in risky behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

It is essential to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS in Uganda. Only 28% of Ugandan women and 36% of men aged 15-49 years have a comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS according to the results of the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey of 2006 (DHS).<sup>3</sup> In particular, awareness levels are lower in rural areas compared to urban areas. Furthermore, the uptake of HIV testing needs to be increased since knowledge of one's HIV status is key in reducing new HIV infections. People living with undiagnosed HIV infection are contributing to sustaining the epidemic since they are unknowingly transmitting the infection to their sexual partners.<sup>4</sup> In addition, they are more likely to miss opportunities for timely access to treatment and support, thereby suffering a premature death compared to those who are diagnosed and treated at an earlier stage.<sup>5,6</sup> HIV testing rates remain low in Uganda; only one-quarter of women and one-fifth of men aged 15-49 years have ever been tested for HIV and received their results. An additional 5% of women and 3% of men have been tested but never received their results. Furthermore, 71% of women and 77% of men have never been tested at all, and are therefore very unlikely to know their HIV status. In addition, 41% of married women in Uganda today urgently require family planning services.<sup>3</sup>

To increase HIV awareness and HIV testing in the Lira District, the Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED) - in collaboration with Text to Change (TTC) - carried out a survey using SMS messages. Mobile phones are one of the fastest spreading technologies in the world, and they are now being used for more than just making calls. Uganda has over 10 million mobile phone subscribers<sup>1</sup> and throughout Africa as a whole it is estimated that more than one million phone users are being added each week. Phone company research in Uganda estimates that approximately 85% of the population has "access" to a mobile phone either through relatives, friends, acquaintances, mobile phone kiosks or itinerant mobile service providers.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Uganda Communications Commission: UCC 2010

## **1.2 Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (DED) and Text to Change (TTC)**

The Deutscher Entwicklungsdienst (German Development Service) is one of the leading European development services for personnel cooperation. Since 1963, more than 15,000 development workers have committed themselves to improving the lives of people in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Their aims are to fight poverty, empower citizens to ensure sustainable development and to preserve natural resources.<sup>8</sup>

DED places development workers - at the request of governmental and non-governmental organizations - in its partner countries, on the basis of framework agreements with the respective governments. DED also supports local civil organizations and municipal structures by providing specialist advice, (supplemented by financial support if required). One of their key areas of work is health: support for rural health systems, promotion of reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS intervention. DED has been working in Uganda since the beginning of the 1970's in order to contribute towards sustainable development and to improve living conditions for Ugandan citizens. The organization currently employs more than 30 development workers, 15 volunteers and another 30 national experts on its programmes. With regards to HIV prevention, DED Lira provides a 'moonlight HIV testing programme', which allows people to come for free and anonymous HIV testing between 6pm and 11pm.

### **Text to Change**

Text to Change (TTC) is a non-profit organization, which was founded in 2007. It uses state of the art mobile phone technology to collect and disseminate health information. TTC works on a demand driven basis, setting up programs with local and international partners. With these partners, TTC aims to support change by increasing awareness and enabling citizens to make informed choices. TTC's mission is to empower citizens by unleashing the potential of mobile telephony to provide and collect information, increase awareness and knowledge levels, enhance transparency and strengthen advocacy.<sup>9</sup>

TTC specializes in interactive and incentive based SMS programs, addressing a wide range of health issues including HIV/AIDS, malaria and reproductive health. TTC is one of the pioneers in using mobile phones for health monitoring and advocacy in Africa and for reaching out to the general public on a large scale. Though based in Uganda, TTC also works in Kenya, Tanzania, Namibia and Madagascar and will be expanding to West Africa and South America in 2011.

## **1.3 Program objectives**

The overall objective of this study was to improve HIV/AIDS awareness and to increase the number of people going for HCT services in Lira. (in order to increase the awareness of one's HIV status to encourage people to seek early treatment and care in order to decrease further HIV transmission).

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Study population

The study population consisted of mobile phone users living in Lira and the surrounding communities on one of the four major networks in Uganda (MTN, UTL, ZAIN, and WARID). In addition, family and friends of the mobile phone users could also be reached through the program. Lira-town has an estimated 80,000 inhabitants (census 2002) and approximately 145,000 people living in the wider district. This population was targeted through radio announcements and flyers encouraging them to opt-in to the survey.

### 2.2 Mobile messages

In total, seven questions were sent on HIV/AIDS issues and three on family planning (Table 1). After receiving responses from participants, an automated reply from the TTC interactive SMS system was generated. Correct responses generated a further SMS confirming the participant's right answer; if participants replied with an incorrect answer, they received additional information to help them. In this way participants were educated on the issues in question. In addition, questions concerning relevant demographic information such as gender, age, place of residence and HIV testing history were also sent. Finally, three general messages about the content and set up of the survey were sent.



**Table 1: SMS questions on HIV knowledge and family planning: Lira survey**

<b>HIV knowledge</b>	A woman can transmit HIV to her baby during pregnancy or breastfeeding. The HIV virus can be cleared from your body by taking Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). HIV is NOT present in: 1). Semen; 2). Sweat; 3). Blood; 4). Breast milk. It is easier to contract the HIV virus if you already have an STI (Sexual Transmitted Infection). HIV weakens the immune system of an infected person by killing: 1). White blood cells; 2). Red blood cells; 3). Antibodies against HIV Women are infected more easily by the HIV virus than men. Prescribed ARVs must be taken under medical supervision, for the rest of your life.
<b>Family planning</b>	Only women are responsible for family planning, not men. Is withdrawal or pulling out a safe method of family planning? Family planning methods can make a woman infertile.

### 2.3 Study procedure

The survey was conducted in Lira, Uganda, in February 2010. The participants were informed of the survey via a one hour radio talk show which was broadcasted on two radio stations, The shows explained how people could subscribe by opting to send an SMS to a toll free short code. After the shows, radio spots were broadcast five times a day (for two days) in the local language (Luo) as well as in English, to further encourage people to participate. In addition, 10,000 flyers were distributed in Lira town (with a description of how to opt in) and some telephone numbers were collected by community health workers on a face-to-face basis. After just one day of promoting the program over 4,500 people had already opted in to the service.

People who subscribed to the survey were automatically added to the survey database. Over three weeks, the SMS questions were sent daily from the TTC SMS platform , targeting an audience of approximately 8,000 mobile phone users across all networks. Respondents were asked to send back their answers via SMS (free of charge) and their responses were captured in the TTC system. All respondents received automatic replies from the TTC platform with additional information regarding the question. Participants in



the survey could also win prizes, for example: airtime, mosquito nets, mobile phones, football jerseys, schoolbags, washing powder and radios. Participation in the survey was confidential. The questions were sent in English. Announcements were also sent to encourage people to go for free HIV/AIDS testing provided by the AIC via the program until February 12, 2010.

### 3 Results

In total, 8,272 unique phone owners subscribed to the survey. 1,222 did not respond to any of the SMS messages. (They were omitted from further analysis, leaving 7,050 participants). The majority of the respondents were male (81%). The age of participants ranged from 12 to 79 years, with a mean age of 28 years. In total, 19% of the participants lived in Lira town, 50% in the Lira region outside of the town and 31% lived outside the targeted region (Table 2).



**Table 2**                      **Characteristics of participants**

	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
- male	3685	81%
- female	871	19%
<b>Mean age in years (range)</b>	28 (12-79)	
<b>Age category</b>		
- under 18 years	200	5%
- 19-30 years	2944	67%
- 31-40 years	856	19%
- 41-50 years	313	7%
- over 51 years	91	2%
<b>Place of residence</b>		
- Lira Town	874	19%
- Lira District, outside town	2326	50%
- Elsewhere	1463	31%



*Knowledge on HIV and family planning*

Questions concerning HIV awareness and family planning were answered by 53% of the participants (Table 3). Approximately 74% of participants answered correctly. Women were much more likely to answer correctly on questions regarding their higher chances of becoming infected with HIV than men and on the issue of a woman transmitting HIV to her baby during pregnancy or breastfeeding. Furthermore, women were also more likely to respond correctly to the question about the presence of HIV in body fluids, and they had a better knowledge about the risks of withdrawal as a family planning method.

**Table 3 Percentage correct answers on items by gender**

<b>Knowledge Item</b>	<b>Correct answer</b>	<b>Response*</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Total</b>
A woman can transmit HIV to her baby during pregnancy or breastfeeding.	Yes	48%	84%	88%**	85%
The HIV virus can be cleared from your body by taking Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs).	No	47%	86%	85%	85%
HIV is NOT present in: 1). Semen; 2). Sweat; 3). Blood; 4). Breast milk	2). Sweat	45%	60%	66%**	61%
It is easier to get the HIV virus if you already have an STI (Sexual Transmitted Infection)	Yes	51%	91%	91%	91%
HIV weakens the immune system of an infected person by killing: 1). White blood cells; 2). Red blood cells; 3). Antibodies against HIV	1). White blood cells	54%	81%	80%	81%
Women are infected more easily with the HIV virus than men.	Yes	58%	65%	73%**	66%
Prescribed ARVs must be taken as under medical supervision, for the rest of your life.	Yes	59%	96%	95%	95%
Only women are responsible for family planning, not men.	Disagree	55%	88%	86%	88%
Is withdrawal or pulling out a safe method of family planning?	No	54%	81%	87%**	82%
Family planning methods can make a woman infertile.	No	56%	81%	79%	80%

\* Proportion of unique respondents that replied to the SMS question

\*\* Statistically, a significantly higher proportion of women than men answering correctly ( $p < 0.001$ )

### ***HIV testing history***

In total, 86% of the participants reported that they had been tested for HIV, 44% of whom had been tested in the past year. Statistically, a significantly higher number of women had been tested than men (91% versus 86%). Of all the participants tested, 98% obtained their test results. Of those who had never been tested for HIV, 97% stated that they would consider going for testing.

### **HIV test uptake in AIC Lira**

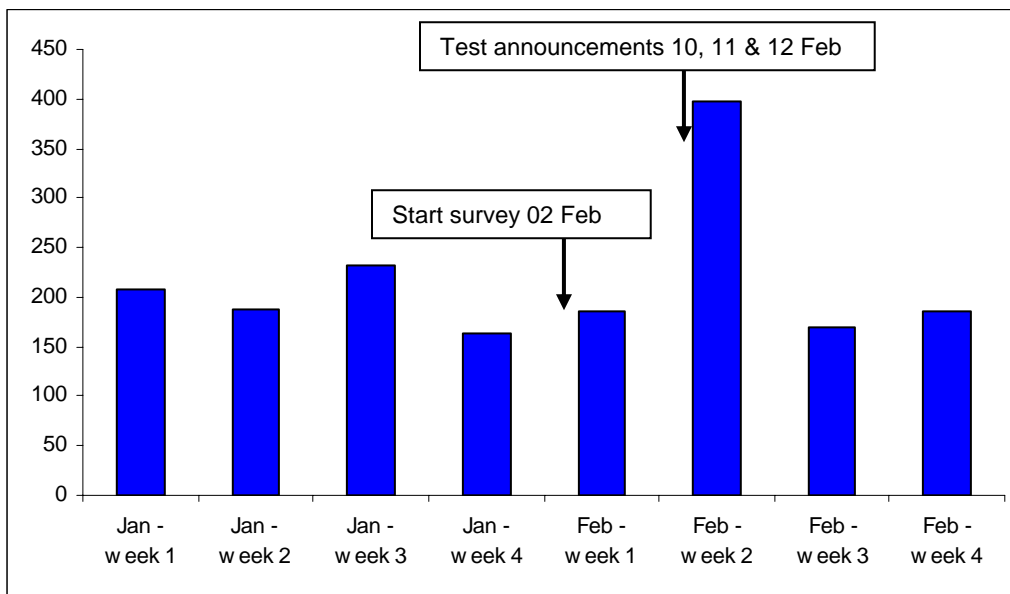
The AIDS Information Centre provided free HIV testing during the survey. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the number of HIV tests in the centre prior to and then during the survey. A remarkable increase in test uptake was recorded following the announcements for free testing. In the second week of February, 398 HIV tests were carried out (double the number compared with 185 in the first week of February).



We measured the increase in the uptake of HCT services at the Lira Aids Information Centre (AIC) by:

- Asking people how they heard about the service;
- Registering people's phone numbers as they arrived at the AIC to access HCT services; these numbers were then matched with those on the Text to Change database.

**Figure 1 HIV test uptake in numbers - Lira AIDS Information Centre**



## ***Acceptability of the SMS program***

Of all the respondents, 80% first heard about the SMS survey on the radio, 7% through flyers and 13% from family members. Men were more likely than women to have heard about the survey on the radio (82% versus 73%) whilst women were more likely than men to have heard about it from relatives (19% versus 11%). 96% of participants stated that the survey helped them to gain knowledge on HIV, 4% said that they did not gain any knowledge. (See annex 2 for testimonials of the participants).

## **4 Conclusions**

The DED-TTC survey reached over 7,000 people in the Lira district. Acceptance of the SMS survey was high. More men than women participated in the survey; the median age of respondents was 28 years. In general, participants had good awareness of HIV and family planning issues. On average, 74% of all questions were answered correctly. Women were more aware than men on several issues. The majority of participants had been tested for HIV at least once, however, only 44% had been tested recently (in the past year). HIV testing at the Lira AIDS information centre increased considerably following an SMS reminder of the free service; in fact test uptake doubled.

The levels of awareness in our survey were high when compared with data from the Domestic Household survey (DHS) of 2006 (where only 28% of women and 36% of men had any comprehensive awareness of HIV/AIDS.<sup>3</sup> In fact, 96% of our participants stated that the survey had helped them to gain new knowledge. The number of questions in our survey was limited compared to the DHS survey, however, which may have had an impact on the overall outcomes. Our survey also highlighted that women were better informed about family planning issues than men and that the majority of participants had been tested before. More importantly, the uptake on testing was much higher than the statistics shown in the DHS report.<sup>3</sup> The results of our survey show that more needs to be done in order to get people tested regularly. One way of encouraging HIV testing is by providing the test free of charge. During the survey, free testing was provided at the AIDS Information Centre in Lira and consequently, it encouraged many people. This shows that by reducing the financial barriers it would seem that more people are likely to come forward for testing.

Radio appeared to be a highly effective medium through which to inform a large audience about the survey. (80% of participants first heard about the survey on the radio, which is perhaps not surprising, as with many parts of Africa, radio ownership in Uganda is high: 78% nationwide, 84% in the Western and Northern regions). That said, the radio shows reached mainly men. Women were more likely to subscribe to the survey when they were informed by relatives. This demonstrates that radio needs to be complemented with other media in order to reach both men and women.

Radio is the preferred media-access choice for most Ugandans for several reasons: language, affordability, broad coverage and diversity of programming. This project takes advantage of the medium of radio in laying the groundwork of the campaign, by producing and broadcasting radio messages and explaining the rules about how to subscribe to the survey. Had the survey not have been announced on the radio, it is likely that the number of people reached in the Lira region would have been much lower.

However, 31% of all respondents were from outside the Lira district. Although information on health will also benefit this population, this area was not initially targeted during the project.

The SMS survey was highly valued by the participants; almost all stated that they gained more awareness and knowledge. SMS constitutes a new and exciting approach for disseminating information that can be widely dispersed directly into people's hands whenever, wherever. Mobile phones are one of the fastest spreading technologies in the world, and they are now being used for more than just making calls. Like SMS, or text, messaging, users are adopting the devices – and the technology – to completely new ends which had never been foreseen when mobile phones were first adopted widely in the late 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Text To Change has a strong history of behaviour change communication interventions ([www.texttochange.com](http://www.texttochange.com)). The collaboration with DED and the Lira Municipal Council worked very well in this project and the combination of an SMS reminder for HIV testing was highly successful. Testimonials of participants (Annex 2) show that the SMS messages were highly valued and the information was shared with family and friends. Hence, the TTC-DED survey effectively reached even more than 7,000 people in Lira district.

Ralf Westhageman from DED Lira, stated: “Both AIC and DED were surprised with the excellent results in terms of program participation and uptake of HCT services. People in Lira liked this programme so much. Even until today we get an enquiry to continue with it. Together with the Town Council, we never expected such a high number (7,000) of subscribers to take part and get involved. In short, it is without doubt, that we can call it “the most successful HIV Programme in Lira to date”.

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## Annex 1 Questions and messages in SMS quiz

- 1 A woman can transmit HIV to her baby during pregnancy or breastfeeding.  
1 = True  
2 = False
- 2 The HIV virus can be cleared from your body by taking Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs)  
1 = True  
2 = False
- 3 HIV is NOT present in:
  1. semen
  2. sweat
  3. blood
  4. breast milk
- 4 It is easier to get the HIV virus if you already have a STI (Sexual Transmitted Infection)  
1 = True  
2 = False
- 5 HIV weakens the immune system of an infected person by killing:
  1. white blood cells
  2. red blood cells
  3. antibodies against HIV
- 6 Only women are responsible for family planning, not men.  
1 = True  
2 = False
- 7 Is withdrawal or pulling out a safe method of family planning?  
1 = True  
2 = False
- 8 Family planning methods can make a woman infertile.  
1 = True  
2 = False
- 9 Women are infected more easily with the HIV virus than men.  
1 = True  
2 = False  
ARVs need to be taken as prescribed under medical supervision, for the rest of your life.
- 10  
1 = True  
2 = False
- 11 Have you ever tested for HIV?  
1 = yes, in the last year

- 2 = yes, more than 1 year ago  
3 = no, never tested
- 12A Answer on Q11 = 1 or 2: Did you obtain the test results?  
1 = yes  
2 = no
- 12B Answer on Q11 = 3: Would you think of getting an HIV test?  
1 = yes  
2 = no
- 13 Are you male or female?
- 14 Please send us your age in years.
- 15 Where do you live?  
1 = Lira Town  
2 = Lira District, outside Lira town  
3 = Other
- 16 How did you first hear about this SMS quiz?  
1 = radio  
2 = flyer  
3 = relative
- 17 Did the TTC quiz help you to gain knowledge on HIV?  
1 = yes  
2 = no  
3 = not sure
- 18 Have you missed any issues in this SMS quiz?



## Annex 2 Testimonials of participants

### TESTIMONIES LIRA DISTRICT: DED - TEXT TO CHANGE VCT/HIV/AIDS DRIVE.

*“My name is Anesta Opoli I am 45 years old and I live in Lira town. I am very happy to be one of the winners of the Text to Change programme; I won some washing soap and I also learnt a lot from the questions. I thought they were tricky but I answered all 10 questions and only two were incorrect. I learnt that women get infected with the virus more easily than men because of their biological make up which is something I didn't know, since I thought that both men and women have equal chances of getting HIV/AIDS. I never imagined that women are at greater risk.*

*I appreciate Text to Change for this drive because I have been tested and I now know my status especially since I was last tested last year. Thank you Text to Change for the work you are doing, I advise everybody to go and get tested so that they can know their status, accept it and get treatment and learn how to live positively. I am willing to be part of another programme of responding to SMS questions sent by Text to Change; I never imagined that I would get such a lot of health information through the mobile phone”.*

*“My name is Ceaser Okello; I am 33 years old and a teacher by profession. I liked the Text to Change programme because I learnt a lot of things about HIV/AIDS and I also won a calculator. For example, there was a question about the importance of taking ARVS. I didn't know that ARVS are taken for the rest of your life and on time. I thought they are like any other drugs which you take for some time and then stop when the dose is finished .I thought it was a good idea for Text to Change to encourage people to go for HIV testing since most people get HIV because they don't know their status and are reckless with their lives. Knowing your status helps you to live responsibly and to take care of your life. Text to Change is doing great work but there is need for more sensitization especially for the people in the villages who do not have mobile phones and therefore could not participate in the DED – TTC quiz. My last word of advice is for people to stay safe”.*

*“My name is Ojera Duncan, I am 56 years old, I live in Lira town and I am HIV positive. I have been living with HIV since 2004. I was counseled and I accepted my status, I learnt to live positively by following the advice of the health workers.*

*When I got an SMS from Text to Change about participating in the health quiz, I was very happy because many people in our community - especially the youth - need to be educated about HIV/AIDS. I also got more courage and strength because I now know I am not alone and that there are people like those from Text to Change who care about people like me who have the virus. I learnt from the quiz that women can more easily get the virus than men because of their biological make up. I thought that all men and women have the same chances of getting the virus, which is something I didn't know and I learnt from the quiz. I thank Text to Change so much for trying to improve the lives of the people in Lira”.*



*My name is Margaret Adoho I am 22 years old and I live in Lira town. I won myself some washing detergent and I also learnt a lot from the quiz that was being sent by Text to Change. For example, I learnt how to care for a person infected with HIV and how to protect myself from getting the HIV infection. The Text to Change programme has been very instrumental in helping change my lifestyle especially after taking the HIV test. I also learnt that ARVS don't cure HIV but help an infected*

*person to lead a normal life and that they are to be taken on time for the rest of ones' life. Thank you Text to Change for improving our knowledge of health and I hope to receive more messages about HIV and other diseases as well, such as malaria”.*