

Somali radio soap for health education

by Isobel Booth

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After years of civil conflict, thousands of people in the Horn of Africa are unable to gain access to education, health or information. At least 65% of the population are still nomadic and the region is strongly Islamic with traditional beliefs and inflexible gender divides. The traditional practice of female genital cutting is widespread. 98% of the female population are circumcised, most of whom undergo Pharonic Infibulation or the removal of most of the genitalia. The results of this practice are harsh and health complications for women are extremely common. The Horn of Africa has some of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates in the world. Levels of HIV/AIDS are also on the rise in the region and the infection needs to be fought before it reaches the epidemic levels found in other parts of Africa.

In a region where the nomadic population rarely visit health facilities and in an essentially oral society where the female literacy rate is 14%, creative methods are needed to get health messages to women of reproductive age and their families. In 1998, Health Unlimited started *Saxansaxo* ('Fresh Breeze'), a Somali soap opera and magazine programme produced by a Somali team in Hargeisa, Somaliland. Its innovative design includes locally sung poetry and the stories that thrive in Somali culture. A Health Unlimited survey found that 77% of the sample owned a radio or had access to one in their family and that 53% said they used radio to get health information.

Saxansaxo forms part of the organisation's Well Women Media Project which also produces radio programmes in Rwanda and Cambodia. It will begin broadcasting weekly on the BBC World Service's Somali Service later this year and will re-broadcast on Radio Hargeisa and other regional radio stations. The programmes hope to reach an audience of over 9 million Somali speakers in Somalia, Puntland, Somaliland, Djibouti, the Somali Regional state of Ethiopia and North-eastern Kenya.

Health Unlimited's past project experience has shown that health communications must be entertaining and culturally appropriate to engage the interest of listeners. Key to achieving this is the involvement of community representatives such as women, elders and religious leaders. Behavioural change of the kind that *Saxansaxo* seeks to effect is generally slow, but using influential figures and audience groups to shape the programme provides an inclusive way of opening up wider discussion of how to have healthy relationships. By using community mobilised listening groups of women, youth and men, the first phase of the project initiated informal social action. These groups would listen to *Saxansaxo* and discuss the content amongst themselves. As the programme became more popular, other members of the community wanted to join the community groups. This resulted in unofficial meetings which give listeners the chance to learn from each other, talk through the issues the programme raises each time and make changes in their own lives.

Saxansaxo really spurs people to action. In a case from Somaliland, men ran home to stop their young daughters from being circumcised after hearing on the soap about the damage the practice causes. Another listener heard the first programme of *Saxansaxo* and liked it because it was relevant to her and her family's health. She asked herself why she alone should benefit from the programme and decided to help

her community. So she set up her own listeners' group and used it to spread the word about the programme.

Saxansaxo mixes health and empowerment messages with the familiar ingredients of drama, comedy and human relationships that make compelling soap operas. Project design puts the listeners' health needs first. Health Unlimited staff visit villages regularly to chat to listeners about what worries or confuses them about their sexual health and wellbeing. The more often a particular topic comes up, the more airtime it is given when programme scripts are written and the programme is made back in the recording studio.

Script writers use listeners' suggestions to make sure the soap characters and the situations they face are true to everyday life. The characters in the soap community vary in age and outlook just as in a real community. The soap's health messages touch a chord with the same variety of people in the audience. As the characters consider their options, their listeners think about what they would do in the same circumstances. Because the soap sounds realistic, listeners discuss with their friends the issues raised in each of the episodes, hence breaking the taboo of talking about sensitive topics.

For instance, a young woman may be starting a sexual relationship and need to sort the facts from the fiction about condoms. Her parents may be unhappy about their daughter having pre-marital sex and her boyfriend may feel hurt that his girlfriend does not seem to trust him. The different storylines in a soap opera let the programme cover the issues from several viewpoints. Relationship issues never just affect one person and what one person needs to know, so does his or her partner.

Skills in radio production have had to be developed from scratch as the years of conflict had left few people with the necessary technical skills. Staff who began with little or no production experience are now working as researchers, writers, producers, presenters and studio technicians. Their skills are now much sought after in Somaliland and are in demand from other organisations. In response, Health Unlimited in Somaliland has been running joint training sessions for its staff, as well as staff from the Ministry of Information and National Guidance, to increase regional technical capacity to make creative programmes which influence change and educate as they entertain.

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