

# The STAR has no limit

HIVOS and OYO have now teamed up on the STAR Project, which will use communication technology to connect with young people in a very different way.



Marius F Johannes  
Ombetja Yehinga Organisation (OYO),  
Namibia  
marius@ombetja.org

## Namibia – ‘a melting pot’

High-quality development collaboration that takes advantage of the opportunities provided by technological development requires people who are both well informed and curious, along with a preparedness to allow new ideas to be explored, and honouring the differences in experience and spirit. Collectively, and consequentially this leads to the development of strategies for fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic on a global level, with a fast growing technology to face a fast growing disease.

## Namibia - ‘a melting pot’

One in five people in Namibia is HIV positive or living with AIDS. The disease has a huge impact on life expectancy, infant mortality rates, and population growth and distribution. Of Namibia’s population of 1.9 million, just under a million are aged below 14. Life expectancy now stands at 43 years. The only way to stop the spread of HIV is through creating an awareness of the disease by clarifying the facts to start, then with prevention. In Namibia, prevention means challenging behavioural norms and persuading people to change.

Technology is shrinking the world; transport and communications are closing distances, and this is having an effect locally as well as globally. Namibia is a melting pot of cultures, but culturo-sexual models are being eroded as young people are starting to get away from their cultural imbedded traditions, to find themselves as hybrids between old and new. Poverty, coupled with an extraordinary level of income inequality is encouraging prostitution, and children as young as 12 years of age are taking ‘sugar-daddies’ who can provide them with material goods in exchange for sex.

An increasing number of school-goers board in school hostels and this makes sexual activity between adolescents even easier than it otherwise might be. Condom use is low, ignorance is high and it is common for people

of all ages to have multiple sexual partners. All of these make health related development more challenging, and highlight a need for creative prevention programmes.

## Unique initiatives of OYO

Passion is the focus of young people in getting experiences is feeded with curiosity in everything that is new. To impassionate young people in experiencing passion in a way that combines heart and thought, Ombetja Yehinga has found a starting point in creativity. Ombetja Yehinga Organisation (OYO), although young, is an organisation that is known for its innovative approach to awareness-raising. Originally established in the Kunene Region in Northern Namibia, its use of drama, dance and song to inspire discussion about HIV and AIDS amongst young people became immediately popular, and requests soon came in, that resulted in the expansion to two further regions of the country. OYO works with the group most at risk from infection, the young people between 10 and 24.

It is vital, when designing HIV/AIDS educational initiatives, that people who ultimately will benefit express a need for the project, and that they are involved at every level. OYO’s methods encourage creativity, foster self-confidence and provide important health and life skills to the young people involved. Learners and community members are encouraged and guided to compose their own dramas and songs, which they perform to schools and communities across the country afterwards.

The experience is fun, it’s interactive and it provides an environment where the participants and their peers can discuss the reality of HIV and AIDS in the country in which they are growing up and exploring their sexuality. At the end of 2000, a group of teachers approached OYO with a request. They wanted to find an interesting way to teach their pupils about HIV and AIDS, one that would engage them. A competition was launched in 2001, and learners were

asked to submit their thoughts about HIV in Namibia in the form of poems and songs. The response was so overwhelming that the groups decided to take it one step further.

The teachers, groups and OYO worked together to turn the songs and poems that stood out into five short films, starring the writers. They are stories of compassion, understanding and they communicate both a warning and hope for the future. In facilitating the making of the films, OYO enabled the learners involved to connect with a wider audience in a way that required them to think creatively about what HIV and AIDS meant to them.

### Twinkling hope with STAR

HIVOS and OYO have now teamed up on the STAR Project, which will use communication technology to connect with young people in a very different way. SMS is a phenomenon the impact of which is yet to be understood; globally, billions of SMS messages are sent every month. Namibia's mobile phone market is growing extremely fast. Almost 46 per cent of the Namibian population now have mobile phones and SMS is one of the most popular ways to communicate, particularly for young people because it is quick, easy and cheap.

The STAR project is the result of collaboration between KPN (the largest telecommunications provider in the Netherlands) and HIVOS (the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries which is named in Dutch as Humanistisch Instituut voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking). It will facilitate the use of a large number of SMS messages, delivered in bulk to a specific target audience. OYO will then explore the concept of viral messaging to reach an even wider audience. Within the context of HIVOS STAR Project, the following needs within the technological development context are addressed immediately:

- By using ICT, we can reach a larger number of individuals than is feasible through conventional methods;
- The use of quality of electronic forums can facilitate networking, sharing of knowledge and best practices in a cost-effective manner;
- SMS can be tailored to suit the target audience.

### SMS – message for social security

OYO's experience in working with young people on health issues, particularly with the highly successful OYO magazine, puts the organisation in a unique position to construct relevant messages that are understood and passed on by its target audience. Integrating the tool into OYO's other work will also help to strengthen those messages. This is particularly true, as OYO will be the first organisation in the country to make use of this modern, popular method of communication, enhancing both profile and reputation with its audience.

OYO as a decision maker can use this technology to discover the aspects about which Namibian youth should be concerned, and to encourage them to think about the uncertain aspects of the future that mostly worry them. The organisation can then explore the ways that these challenges around sexuality and HIV/AIDS might unfold. Because there is no single answer to such enquiries, the SMS tool could directly trigger mass development thinking by using prescribed indigenous knowledge systems. In

## UNICEF and the Indian Olympic Association to raise HIV/AIDS awareness

In October 2005, the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) and UNICEF have entered into a partnership on HIV/AIDS awareness among young people. The Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Shri Suresh Kalmadi, President, Indian Olympic Association and Mr. Eimar Barr, Deputy Director - Operations, UNICEF – India at the Asian Workshop on HIV/AIDS prevention through sports. Ms. Sheila Dikshit, Chief Minister of Delhi was chairperson at the signing and addressed the gathering. Recognising sports as an important means of improving the lives of children, the IOA-UNICEF collaboration will focus on promoting initiatives to enhance national awareness of the UNICEF Programme, using the opportunities provided through national games, associated functions and events. UNICEF and the IOA will collaborate with sports celebrities for endorsement, participation in special events, field visits and public service announcements with special focus on awareness generation amongst the youth on protecting themselves from HIV.

Source: [http://www.unicef.org/india/media\\_965.htm](http://www.unicef.org/india/media_965.htm)

short, the STAR Project explores what the future might look like in mass sensitising of African health issues and the likely challenges of living in it.

Based on intuition and material created by the participants through an open process, the text messages must be crafted as analytical structures where health messages or information written as stories make potential futures seem vivid and compelling in taking development issues such as HIV/AIDS as norm, not by prescribing to the viewer, but by creating dialogue after being read.

The messages should not provide a consensus view of the future, nor are they predictions; they may describe a context of Namibian HIV/AIDS development and how it may change, for potential viewer/reader of the text. Within the context of OYO, the vision for the implication and potential of the STAR Project is 'dialogue'.

The SMS-tool is intended to form a basis for strategic conversation as a method for considering potential implications and possible responses to different events. The messages must provide the reader with a common language and concepts for thinking and talking about current events, and a shared basis for exploring future uncertainties and making more successful decisions, by instigating behaviour change. It is especially a good instrument as it guarantees anonymity on a distinct level - concerning the sensitive topic of HIV, anonymity is one of the most important aims that have to be reached, if the fight against ignorance shall make steps in the future. HIVOS and OYO (STAR Project) partnership places a strong emphasis on the joint definition of a 'problematique' (HIV/AIDS), a shared perception of issues that need to be addressed via the SMS tool, and on the synthesis of ideas, rather than just extended and deeper analysis and testing of ICT. ■